

THE PANDEMIC CHALLENGES FOR TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES AT THE CROSS-BORDER POST AREAS OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA-PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a threat to the border area of the Republic of Indonesia-Papua New Guinea (RI-PNG). To prevent the spread of the virus, both countries closed border posts and border markets in January 2020. This article aims to analyse the challenges faced by traditional communities in Indonesia who share cultures and traditions with their counterparts in Papua New Guinea and are used to crossing borders without restraint before the pandemic. From the view of community security, the emergence of COVID-19 in the border areas of the RI-PNG is a threat to people in the vicinity. The closure of cross-border posts and border markets has implications for native Papuan communities, affecting their ability to maintain their traditional relationships and values. Through qualitative descriptive research using field study as a research method, primary data were collected through interviews,

supplemented with secondary data from library research. This research reveals that the closure of cross-border posts and border markets has disrupted the sustainability of culture, traditions, kinship, and traditional economic activities among traditional communities in the border area. Dissatisfied with the lockdown imposed by the Indonesian and Papua New Guinean governments, the traditional border crossers took advantage of illegal routes to continue their traditional activities. However, they were also very concerned about cross-border criminals exploiting the same track. A growing concern was emerging that the security measures implemented to safeguard citizens during the pandemic would persist, thereby hindering the restoration of traditional cross-border movement to normal conditions.

Keywords: Community security, border security, COVID-19, West Papua, Papua New Guinea

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on human civilisation, affecting almost all communities worldwide. Under this circumstance, it is interesting to examine how vulnerable communities coped with the challenges posed by the pandemic, considering that they were already experiencing vulnerabilities before the pandemic. Studies related to vulnerable communities have examined the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups in urban and rural areas (Fillali et al. 2022), ethnic minorities (Wiśniowski et al. 2023), and migrant and refugee communities (Ullah 2022). Existing studies show the destructive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable communities. The pandemic has caused vulnerable groups to be even more vulnerable and require a longer recovery than other communities. This article intends to contribute to the discussion by enquiring into the specific challenges encountered by traditional communities living along national borders, such as those of the Republic of Indonesia-Papua New Guinea (RI-PNG).

Primarily, this study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community security and broader border security, particularly on the Indonesian side. Recently, previous studies on security issues in Papua during the pandemic focused on economic security and armed violence. Tambunan and Lantang (2022) analyse the implications of COVID-19 on the economic security of the people at the RI-PNG border. This study reveals that the pandemic has caused income reduction, even income loss, due to the closure of cross-border access. Income reduction may lead to the emergence of unemployment and debt. The long-term implication is the widespread poverty

in the RI-PNG border area. Prameswari and Husna (2022) discuss armed violence between security forces and the insurgents during the pandemic. The armed violence threatens human security and causes suffering among Papuans living in conflict areas.

This article seeks to enrich knowledge about security threats to native Papuans in addition to deadly threats from the pandemic. This analysis suggests that the emergence of COVID-19 in the border areas of the RI-PNG, which resulted in the closure of cross-border posts and border markets, posed a threat to community security and broader community security because it hampered native Papuans' ability to maintain their traditional relationships and values.

The land border separating Indonesia and PNG spans approximately 780 km from north to south (Muluk 2010). At the time of the research, the border territory on the Indonesian side was in Papua Province. Due to the 2022 regional enlargement, the border territory is currently located in three provinces: Papua, Highland Papua, and South Papua. On the PNG side, the border territory is in Sandaun Province and Western Province. According to the most recent data from 2019, the population of Papua Provinces was 3,379,302 (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Papua 2019). Meanwhile, based on the Population Estimates 2021 project in PNG, the total population of Sandaun Province and Western Province was 736,743 (National Statistical Office and United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA] 2023).

Although separated by national borders, native Papuan communities in Indonesian territory still maintain traditional relations with their counterparts living in PNG. Certain communities even have members who reside in PNG territory (Sandaun Province and Western Province) and hold PNG citizenship. It is common for community members to own customary land, agricultural land, or hunting grounds in PNG territory. Given their shared Melanesian ancestry (Lawson 2013), these communities also exhibit similar cultures and traditions. Therefore, members of these native communities frequently cross the border on specific occasions to partake in traditional ceremonies and cultural festivals.

In the past, tribal members used traditional routes to cross the border. However, with the implementation of a border management agreement between the governments of Indonesia and PNG, official crossings are now restricted to designated cross-border posts. Two commonly used *Pos Lintas Batas Negara* (Cross-Border Posts [CBP]) are CBP Skouw in Jayapura City and CBP Sota in Merauke Regency. The Indonesian government has invested in developing good facilities at these two CBPs. Furthermore, markets have

been established in both CBPs to facilitate and enhance trade and economic activities at the border (Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia 2019).

The increasing number of active COVID-19 cases in the RI-PNG border regions prompted the closure of border areas starting from 30 January 2020. The closure was initially implemented by the Papua New Guinea Immigration and Citizenship Agency (PNGICA) and subsequently followed by Indonesian immigration authorities at the northern border crossing post, CBP Skouw in Jayapura City, as well as the southern border crossing post, CBP Sota in Merauke Regency (Giay 2020).

While the closure of national borders and limitations on physical movements and socio-cultural interactions was mandatory according to the government, these measures nonetheless created uncertainties and risks for marginalised groups, including ethnic communities (King 2021). In the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the limited cross-border interaction posed significant challenges for traditional communities residing along the border areas of RI-PNG. Under normal circumstances, these communities frequently engaged in cross-border visits for kinship purposes, cultural traditions, and tending to their customary lands. Additionally, the border markets played a crucial role in meeting their essential needs (Usman and Sairin 2017). However, the unprecedented circumstances caused by the pandemic had disrupted these customary practices, prompting the present study to analyse the challenges faced by traditional communities residing near CBP Skouw and Sota, who had a history of unrestricted border crossings for cultural and traditional purposes prior to the pandemic.

BORDERLAND OF RI-PNG AND CROSS-BORDER ACTIVITIES AMONG TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

The contemporary border of RI-PNG dates back to the colonial era, and is based on colonial maps agreed upon by the Dutch and the British. On the southern border, delimitation refers to the convention of 1895. The agreement was triggered by the movement of native Marind from Dutch-controlled territory into then British Papua, which provoked demands from London for the Dutch to control their locals. The two colonial rulers then negotiated and defined the boundaries (van der Veur 1966). When Australia administered authority in PNG, Jakarta and Canberra renegotiated the land boundary of RI-PNG from north to south, resulting in the 1973 Australian-Indonesian border agreement. Based on this document, the Republic of Indonesia and

the independent government of PNG renegotiated the 1973 agreement with minor but significant amendments in 1979 and 1984. The agreement contains several provisions, including border area definition; joint border committee; consultation and liaison; border crossing for traditional and customary purposes and by non-traditional inhabitants; border trade and the exercise of traditional rights to land and water in the border area; border security; quarantine, navigation; development of natural resources; environmental protection; and compensation for damages (May 1991).

Along the border from north to south, there are fifty-two meridian monuments; twenty-four are under the control of Indonesia, and twenty-eight are managed by PNG. These meridian monuments have their origins in the colonial history involving the Dutch and British. They were initially used to demarcate the boundary between West and East New Guinea (now Papua and Papua New Guinea) from 1884 to 1905 (Office of the Geographer, Bureau of Intelligence and Research 1977). A meridian monument is a boundary pillar positioned along the longitude. The Indonesia-Papua New Guinea meridian monument project was officially declared in 1966, with both countries agreeing to establish a total of fifty-two monuments. Fourteen of these monuments were built between 1966 and 1967, while the remaining thirty-eight were constructed between 1983 and 1989 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2019).

Among the fifty-two meridian monuments along the RI-PNG border, two areas stand out as major crossing points: MM.1 Skouw-Wutung and MM.13 Sota-Wariaber. In these two areas, the Indonesian government built two modern CBPs. The CBP in Skouw was built in 2017, while the CBP in Sota was established in 2019. The government also built a border market in each CBP to enhance the economy and trade in border areas (Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia 2019). In addition to two CBPs, there are ten active immigration checkpoints (Antara 2021).

Various prominent native Papuan communities live along the border with PNG such as Sentani in Jayapura City, Keerom in Keerom Regency, Ngalum in Pegunungan Bintang Regency, Mandobo in Boven Digoel Regency, and Marind-anim in Merauke Regency. In terms of population, the native communities have the largest representation compared to other ethnic groups. According to the 2010 census, in Pegunungan Bintang, where native Papuans make up 95.31% of the population, the Ngalum people constitute the largest ethnic group, accounting for 42.61% of the population. In Boven Digoel, where native Papuans comprise 66.95% of the population, the most

populous group is the Mandobo, representing 21.48%. As for the other three administrative areas, the native Papuan communities account for 34.91% in the city of Jayapura, 41.33% in Keerom, and 37.27% in the southernmost regency, Merauke (Ananta et al. 2016).

Recognising the significance of cultural connections among traditional communities in the border area, the Governments of Indonesia and PNG have reached an agreement to establish special cross-border access for these communities as stated in the “Basic Agreement Between the Government of The Republic of Indonesia and the Government of The Independent State of Papua New Guinea on Border Arrangements” signed in 1973. The agreement comprises twenty-one articles, some of which specifically emphasise the Border Crossing for Traditional and Customary Purposes (Article 4), the Exercise of Traditional Rights to Land and Waters in the Border Area (Article 5), and Customary Border Trade (Article 9) (Badan Pengelola Perbatasan dan Kerja Sama Luar Negeri Provinsi Papua 2014). These three articles emphasise the obligation of the states to respect the traditional practices of permanent residents in the border area and acknowledge their cultural ties in various activities such as marriage, gardening, land use, gathering, hunting, fishing, and other water usages. To facilitate the implementation of these articles, both governments have enforced the use of the *Pas Lintas Batas* (Border Crossing Pass).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional communities effectively utilised the presence of CBP in Skouw, Sota, and other smaller cross-border posts to facilitate their daily activities. The primary users of these official crossing facilities were villagers from the border area who crossed occasionally. In addition to these individuals, there are three other categories of border crossers. Some crossed the border to seek temporary refuge in PNG due to concerns over their safety amidst Indonesian military activities. Others crossed to seek political asylum in PNG or another country. Some members of resistance groups also crossed the border to find temporary shelter before returning to Indonesian territory (May 1991). In the “lump” area of the Fly River on the RI-PNG border, there were around 5,000 Papuan refugees. The PNG government had asked these refugees to be repatriated to Indonesia or relocated to an official refugee camp so that they could receive assistance from the United Nations. However, the majority of refugees refused to leave and insisted on staying in the border areas under harsh living conditions, waiting for Papuan independence (Wibowo 2021).

Native Papuan communities that commonly cross the border to maintain their traditional relations are Skouw and Moso in Muara Tami District,

Jayapura City. In Keerom Regency, traditional cross-border activities are commonly found among Manem in Arso Timur District, Walsa in Waris District, Humbuluk in Senggi District, Emem in Web District, and Ndra in Web and Towe Districts. The same activities are often conducted in the interior by Ngalum in Pegunungan Bintang Regency and Muyu in Boven Digul Regency. Marind-anim does the same practice in Merauke Regency. Being united by blood and culture, the traditional border crossers have always crossed for three broad purposes: to meet basic needs, to maintain social institutions, and to preserve cultural identity (Usman and Sairin 2017).

Some members cross the border to make sago or to hunt (May 1991). Some cross the border because their customary land, including gardens, fields, and sago hamlets, are in PNG. For example, the people in Sota have customary land rights in Kanume, PNG. On the other hand, the Kanume people have customary land in Sota, Merauke Regency. The other people who do not have customary rights sometimes visit the neighbouring villages to help their relatives with gardening in hopes of getting a share (Hapsari 2016).

Members of traditional communities also cross borders to maintain the relationship between kin members, relatives, and traditional leaders. The meetings are expected to build contacts and renew social relations in maintaining solidarity among communities separated by the states. Through cross-border activities, traditional community members also show their participation in grave construction activities, traditional houses renovation, and the inauguration of tribal chiefs. Cross-border activities are also aimed to bring a closer relationship between villagers, thereby further strengthening social cohesion, brotherhood, and solidarity between them (Usman and Sairin 2017).

Traditional communities in the border areas of RI-PNG share a common cultural identity. For example, there is a shared identity between the Kanum community in Sota and PNG. In the southern border area of Sota District-Galumbu District, the communities believe they came from the same ancestors. According to PNG's mythology, the three great clans, such as Ndikwan Galumbu, Ndimar, and Mbanggu, originate from the Nibung tree, located in the Galumbu hamlet of PNG. These three clans then spread to various areas both in Merauke and PNG. Unfortunately, the relationship between the traditional communities on the border was later influenced by the separation of territory in the Anglo-Dutch colonial era. In 1895, the British and Dutch governments divided the southern part of New Guinea (currently Merauke, Papua, and Walumbu, PNG) with the Torasi River as a boundary. This separation is based on the choice of the community. Those who chose to

join Australia were placed in Weriaber hamlet, PNG. The people who joined the Netherlands were placed in Keme hamlet, Sota, Indonesia. Members of traditional communities often cross the border to maintain their shared cultural identity by attending traditional ceremonies and parties (Hapsari 2016).

Cultural ties also still exist in the northern border area (Skouw-Wutung). Skouw has three main clans: Skouw Sae, Skouw Mabo, and Skouw Sae. Previously, Skouw village was called “Te Tape” with four tribal chiefs of Rollo, Ramela, Patipeme, and Membilong. According to Norotouw (2012), Membilong comes from Wutung village, PNG, which then migrated to Skouw Yambe. Skouw people also use *Tok Pisin*, usually called the *Pijin* language. It is the English language with PNG’s accent. Most Skouw people use this language to communicate with their relatives in PNG (Masnun and Octaviana 2016).

In response to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PNG government, through the PNG Immigration and Citizenship Authority, announced the closure of the border post in the northern part (Wutung) and southern part (Wariaber) on 30 January 2020 (Giay 2020). Meanwhile, the Indonesian government announced the closure of border posts two months after PNG on 26 March 2020 (Kumendong and Tambunan 2022). This border closure also impacted the closing of the border market.

THE PANDEMIC’S CONSEQUENCES AS A COMMUNITY SECURITY AND BORDER SECURITY CONCERN

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the border regions of RI-PNG not only prompted the closure of CBP and border markets, but also posed a significant threat to the community security of native Papuans. Community security is a subset of human security that gained prominence following the release of the 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Human security contains seven subsets. In addition to community security, there are economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, and political security (UNDP 1994). Community security specifically addresses the threats faced by communities. The term “community” can be understood in various ways, depending on its spatial, social, and cultural dimensions. From a spatial perspective, a community can encompass different levels, ranging from the national to the local level. It can also be defined socially based on shared interests, values, and needs, such as youth, women, the working-class

community, or the disabled community. Furthermore, communities can extend beyond national borders, encompassing transnational communities (Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery 2009). Another way to define a community is through its cultural aspects. Factors such as religion, culture, ethnicity, geographical/territorial location, and language play a significant role in shaping community formation and identity (Syla and Forrester 2018).

Community security, as a subcategory of human security, encompasses the protection of communities against various challenges, including the breakdown of community structures, the loss of traditional relationships and values, as well as sectarian and ethnic violence (UNDP 1994). The UNDP's 1994 human development report focuses on the security of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. Threats to community security can arise from a variety of sources. The examples include discrimination, exclusion, violence perpetrated by other groups, and threats posed by the state itself. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) identifies a range of threats to community security, including those stemming from inter-ethnic, religious, and identity-based issues (UNOCHA 2009).

In 2009, the UNDP's publication *Community security and social cohesion: Towards a UNDP approach* proposes a broader definition of community security that incorporates both group and personal security while focusing primarily on fearlessness. Threats to personal and group security can include "threats from the state" (physical torture), threats from other states in the case of war, threats from other groups of people (ethnic tension), threats from individual or gangs, threats directed against women (rape, domestic violence), threats directed at children (child abuse), and threats to self (suicide, drug use) (Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery 2009: 13–14). The threats listed above are used as a guide in this research to uncover the threats encountered by traditional communities on the RI-PNG border during the pandemic. However, because the pandemic threat has not been included in the list of threats to community security, this research also discloses new types of threats based on traditional community experiences. The threats they confront during the pandemic are likely to contribute to discussion on community security and to the development of contextual policy framework for the Papuan communities at the border of RI-PNG.

Community security encompasses two dimensions: external threats to the overall security of the community, including its identity and practices, and internal threats arising from within the community that jeopardise the security of individuals, such as oppressive traditional practices or structural violence (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007). Key to maintaining community security

is “social cohesion”. According to UNDP, social cohesion is about respect for diversity (in terms of religion, ethnicity, economic situation, political preferences, sexuality, gender, age) as well as tolerance, both individually and institutionally. Increasing social cohesion will help to build trust within society and government, encouraging individuals to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals (Sedra 2022). The World Bank defines social cohesion as the ability of individuals to cooperate and create institutional capacity for productive change. Achieving social cohesion requires active participation of individuals within a group. Two crucial interconnected factors for fostering social cohesion are social inclusion and equal opportunities, and the growth of social capital (Syla and Forrester 2018).

Both external and internal threats to community security can undermine social inclusion and erode social capital. The breakdown of social inclusion and social capital contributes to rising levels of insecurity. Because social capital is “often of a ‘bonding’ character that holds a specific identity group (whether ethnic population or political group) within a community”, its rupture and the breakdown of social inclusion will ultimately destabilise the community (Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery 2009: 9). In the long run, community members will lose connection with the region they rule, as well as their history, kinship, culture, and future life.

Referring to the explanation above, this study understands that the pandemic posed an external threat to traditional communities. The closure of cross-border posts and border markets had a significant impact on the native Papuan community’s social fabric. As a result, social cohesion was disrupted, jeopardising the ability of native Papuan communities to uphold their traditional relationships and values.

Considering this study focuses on the vulnerabilities encountered by the native Papuan community living in the border vicinity, it is also necessary to discuss the threats in the context of border security. Although a specific and comprehensive definition of border security is yet to be established, two distinct perspectives can be identified. From a state-centric viewpoint, border security refers to the measures implemented by a government to manage and regulate the movement of people, goods, and information across its borders. Its primary objective is to safeguard the country’s sovereignty, national security, public safety, and economic interests (Salter 2005; Manjarrez 2015). In a broader and more humane sense, border security is understood as the safety of life support systems and the lack of risks to people’s lives and activities in border regions (Côté-Boucher et al. 2014). While the former perspective primarily focuses on government policies and law enforcement,

the latter encompasses two crucial elements that are often overlooked but vital in managing border security. Firstly, it recognises the significance of human activities undertaken by individuals and community groups in border areas. Secondly, it acknowledges the broader social processes that shape individual actions, such as market and economic forces, local regulations and customs, borderland culture, and regional politics (Brunet-Jailly and Dupeyron 2007). Taking a people-centred approach, scholarly research often centres around local borderland communities. The literature explores how these communities, characterised by their language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sense of belonging, can either reinforce territorial and communal divisions or bridge international boundaries when they share a common culture (Brunet-Jailly 2005). This article aims to contribute to discussions on border security by demonstrating how the pandemic's effects have separated formerly integrated local border communities, resulting in border security infractions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article presents the findings of a descriptive study conducted between late 2020 and the first quarter of 2022. The primary objective of the study is to provide a comprehensive and precise description of the subjects, encompassing the various circumstances, events, environments, and situations they are involved in (Neuman 2007). The subjects of this research are the communities residing in the RI-PNG cross-border posts located in Skouw, Jayapura City, and Sota, Merauke Regency. The focus of the study is on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the impact of the closure of cross-border posts and markets.

Data for this study were collected through field research, which involved observations and interviews conducted at the subjects' living and residing locations (Babbie 2014). The researchers documented the observation results using visual data, specifically through photo documentation, and transcribed the audio recordings. The interviews were carried out with community members residing in the border areas and officials stationed at the CBP using a prepared guide. The selection of resource persons followed the snowballing technique (Babbie 2014). The participants were community members and leaders who regularly crossed borders and utilised cross-border posts, as well as local traders involved in border marketplaces; they included seven community members, two community leaders, and six local traders (Table 1). Additionally, two government officials served as informants.

Table 1: Profile of informants

Informant	Background	Gender	Age range	Location
Sk1	Government official	Female	40–50	Jayapura
Sk2	Local trader	Male	40–50	Skouw
Sk3	Local trader	Male	30–40	Skouw
Sk4	Community member	Male	20–30	Skouw
Sk5	Community member	Male	20–30	Skouw
Sk6	Community member	Male	20–30	Skouw
So1	Local trader	Female	30–40	Sota
So2	Community member	Male	20–30	Sota
So3	Government official	Male	40–50	Sota
So4	Local trader	Female	30–40	Sota
So5	Community member	Male	50–60	Sota
So6	Community leader	Male	50–60	Sota
So7	Community leader	Male	30–40	Sota
So8	Community member	Male	20–30	Sota
So9	Local trader	Female	30–40	Sota
So10	Local trader	Female	40–50	Sota
So11	Community member	Male	20–30	Sota

In addition to the data from field observations and interviews, secondary data were collected through library research. Library materials collected included documents, archives, research reports relevant to the object of study, and media reports (Prior 2003).

The data collected from various sources were then processed and analysed. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998). This process allowed for the identification of key themes that emerged from the observations, interviews, and secondary materials. Subsequently, all the identified themes were categorised to develop a comprehensive description of the threats faced by communities as a result of the closure of cross-border posts and border markets. By organising the themes, the study aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges experienced by the communities in this particular context.

THE PANDEMIC CHALLENGES FOR TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

The outbreak of COVID-19 prompted local authorities in Papua to impose a lockdown. In the hinterland of Papua, traditional communities closed road access to prevent people outside the communities from entering their villages.

There is a concern that the COVID-19 harms traditional communities, which have a different pattern of life and access to health services compared to urban communities (Gokkon 2020). However, the lockdown also presents challenges for traditional communities at the border. From the interview data and secondary sources, this study discovered four primary themes of challenges that the native Papuan communities faced during the pandemic: difficulties in conducting traditional economic activities; disruption in kinship, cultural, and traditional relationships; issues with illegal routes; and the presence of security forces.

Difficulties in Conducting Traditional Economic Activities

The pandemic impacted the lives of traditional communities at the border. The closure of the borders disrupted economic activities, causing difficulties for those residing in traditional villages (Tambunan and Lantang 2022). This particularly affected community members who relied on hunting and farming as a means of sustaining their basic needs in PNG. According to an interviewee, “[t]hey also could not meet relatives to discuss access to food” (So3, interview, 19 December 2020). People who used market facilities at the border were also experiencing a crisis as “[t]hey could not trade traditional commodities such as sago, areca nut, and lesser yam” (Sk6, interview, 2 April 2022).

In certain areas, the pandemic led to a resurgence in agricultural activities as a response to food insecurity and hunger. There was an increasing awareness of the importance of gardening, prompting many individuals to cultivate previously unused lands to grow traditional Papuan food crops such as *petatas* (sweet potato), *bete* (taro), cassava, and vegetables (Ashari 2020). In Sota, traditional communities “grew bananas, cassava, and *petatas* as staple foods” (So10, interview, 7 March 2022). Unfortunately, for traditional communities whose lands were across the border, this activity was impossible.

Both traditional communities at the borders of Indonesia and PNG have always been interdependent. According to an interview, “[m]embers of communities from Papuan usually buy meat or fish in PNG, while community members from PNG prefer to access necessities at the Indonesian border market” (So1, interview, 19 December 2020). At the same time, “[t]raditional communities in Indonesia need natural products from PNG, whereas traditional communities in PNG need basic food products from Indonesia” (So7, interview, 19 December 2020). When experiencing economic difficulties, members of traditional communities also cross the border to ask for help from

relatives in neighbouring countries: “From Papua, they pass to ask for lesser yam from their relatives in PNG. On the other hand, relatives in PNG came to ask for one bale of sago to survive” (So3, interview, 19 December 2020). The effect of lockdown on this interdependency was severe as the following informant described:

Border closures caused traditional communities in Papua trouble in obtaining basic needs and trading agricultural products, and harmed traditional communities in PNG. When the border was closed, traditional communities in PNG also suffered because they could not access necessities that were obtained cheaper from Papua. (Sk1, interview, 31 March 2022)

The situation faced by native Papuans on the RI-PNG border is similar to the experiences of border communities in many African countries, such as Ghana. The economic well-being of these border communities heavily relies on trade and cross-border movement. Border closures have harmed people’s livelihoods. The restrictions have significantly slowed down economic activity because people cannot bring commodities to and from outside their country’s border (Hlovor and Botchway 2021).

The inconvenient situation during the pandemic caused traditional communities in PNG to “urge their local government in Wereaber to ask the Merauke Regency government for shopping access at the CBP market. Access to CBP Sota was then opened to traditional communities from PNG to shop three times a week on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday” (So10, interview, 7 March 2022).

In Sota, following the opening of the CBP and border markets on a limited basis, economic activities were only allowed to take place in the CBP area. The traditional community members from PNG “were only allowed to shop and trade at border markets. They were forbidden to enter the village to shop for daily necessities. Meetings with relatives and friends could only be conducted in the CBP area” (So1, interview, 19 December 2020). For this reason, it was necessary to arrange a time for meetings and shopping, which “for the border market was determined three times a week” (So10, interview, 19 December 2020).

Later, since April 2021, both border posts in the southern and northern areas were temporarily closed again due to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases. Traditional communities were also not allowed to cross the border to minimise the spread of the virus in the border areas. The prohibition was initiated by the government of PNG, due to the surge of positive cases in

Papua Province. The PNG's government also deployed PNG Defence Force in the border areas to ensure that the traditional community comply with the regulation (*Radio New Zealand* 2021).

The use of lockdown is an old answer to a new challenge; it only solves half of the problems (Hlovor and Botchway 2021). The lockdown, to some extent, is very disturbing for traditional communities that rely on natural products and commodities from outside the borders because their economic activities have long been shaped by the principles of local “borderland markets and trade” (Brunet-Jailly and Dupeyron 2007). For them, the lockdown and its aftermath have not only had an economic impact but also posed an indirect threat for community from “other identity-based issues” (UNOCHA 2009: 7).

Disruption in Kinship, Cultural, and Traditional Relationships

Aside from economic challenges, traditional communities also faced the disruption of cultural and kinship relations. Before the pandemic, traditional communities regularly crossed the borders to cultivate gardens in the neighbouring village, visit their relatives, and exchange some food. They must cross because “they share the common *hak ulayat* or customary land rights. *Hak ulayat* refers to the ownership of land in which traditional communities on the border of Indonesia own land in the neighbouring village and vice versa” (Sk1, interview, 31 March 2022). For traditional communities on the border, crossing borders is a necessity. One of the informants described their situation as follows:

Many of them are descended from one mother and one father. It is the national borders that cause them to have different nationalities. They have relatives living in PNG who are from the same kin. As one kin, they cannot be separated. Apart from being related by blood, they have a close kinship relationship because they have the same customary land and culture. (So3, interview, 19 December 2022)

However, since the closure of border posts, traditional communities found it difficult to cross the border. Some crossed the border illegally to ensure the safety of relatives, and some to fulfil their basic needs. Due to the pandemic, people in PNG, for example, “crossed borders illegally only for asking food, such as sago, from their families in Indonesia. On the other hand, people from Indonesia crossed the line illegally to request lesser yam from their families in PNG” (So1, interview, 19 December 2020). The existence of illegal border

crossers, who are indigenous people, shows the strong kinship relationship among members of traditional communities.

Recognising these challenges, both governments allowed the implementation of a one-time entry only for three days a week so that border crossers could visit their relatives in the CBP area. On Sota border, for example, “traditional communities from Wariaber could meet with their kin on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday but were not allowed to stay overnight” (So1, interview, 19 December 2020).

Like other traditional communities in Papua, communities in border areas also hold various traditional ceremonies. Types of ceremonies include the forty-day ceremony, wedding procession ceremony, pig-killing ceremony, and the ceremony of giving customary land rights (Hapsari 2016). For traditional communities, these ceremonies are very important in introducing and imparting the values, customs, and rituals necessary to maintain culture. An informant described the challenges they faced in continuing this tradition due to the length of stay limitations in place prior to the pandemic and the lockdown during the outbreak:

Before the pandemic, community members had complained about the limited time to attend traditional ceremonies whose implementation took longer than the thirty days maximum given to traditional border crossers. The pandemic made participation in ceremonies even more difficult. The border closure caused it to be impossible to organise or participate in the ceremony. (So10, interview, 7 March 2022)

To maintain cultural identity among traditional communities in border areas, there is a border festival every year. The purpose of this activity is to create harmony between communities in Indonesia and PNG. On the southern border, the Border Cultural Festival showcases the culture of the Kanum communities, one of the communities residing in Merauke Regency, and has members living in PNG (Yuniarto 2019). In the north, a similar activity is called the Skouw Cross Border Festival. Its purpose is to strengthen the brotherhood of the cross-border population (Ramdhani 2019). The pandemic has thwarted the two activities, which are momentous as gathering events for traditional community members from Indonesia and PNG.

For members of traditional communities, home is where their land is (Wibowo 2021). The kinship ties can be well maintained if they can regularly access their customary land. Managing the customary land together opens opportunities for fellow relatives to meet. However, the tightening of border crossings to reach customary lands across the border has made it

increasingly challenging for traditional communities to nurture these kinship connections. If this condition persists, community security as a protection against “community breakdown” and “loss of traditional relationships and values” (UNDP 1994: 31–32) will perish inside the bordering native Papuan villages. This situation will not only harm community security but also border security. Social cohesion among native Papuan communities across borders will further decline. As a result, even though they share the same culture, they can no longer act as local borderland communities that bridge an international boundary (Brunet-Jailly 2005).

Illegal Routes as Alternatives

The traditional border crossers were dissatisfied with the lockdown imposed by the Indonesian and PNG governments. Therefore, “they took advantage of illegal routes to continue conducting traditional economic activities such as hunting and farming. In addition to meeting the needs of daily life, they also crossed through illegal routes to interact with relatives in PNG” (So3, interview, 19 December 2020).

Among immigration officials, “the alternative route is known as Line C. During the pandemic, traditional border crossers joined this route because they could not pass through the CBP” (So3, interview, 19 December 2020). According to Papua Province’s Immigration Office, residents living along the RI-PNG border areas are among the illegal border crossers (*ANTARANEWS.com* 2021).

There are many illegal routes on the RI-PNG border. Even though the official access is closed, they can still cross the border through illegal lines. “Inadequate infrastructure, such as road access and communication lines, keeps alive illegal routes. This inadequacy is the main obstacle for the government in securing the border” (Sk1, interview, 31 March 2022). On the PNG side, the government is also concerned about illegal routes. The PNG government identifies eight illegal main entry and exit points from PNG to Indonesia. They are Wutung, Scotchio, Bewani, Kwek, Kembratoro, Yuri (Green River), Huhi (Green River), and Idam/Yapsie (Nanau 2020).

Even before the pandemic, illegal routes already existed. Criminals and traditional community members with different ideologies took advantage of these routes. Those criminal border crossers included smugglers of marijuana from PNG. In 2020, the Papua Immigration Office recorded 116 foreign nationals who had faced legal sanctions and were deported. Among them

were ninety-nine PNG citizens, fourteen Chinese, two South Korean, and one US citizen (*ANTARANEWS.com* 2021).

Members of traditional communities were overly concerned about transboundary crime. Activities they felt to be very worrying were the smuggling of weapons and illegal drugs. These activities were viewed as highly alarming, regardless of whether there was a pandemic or not. An informant described it as follows:

The perpetrators continued to run their businesses. Drug smuggling was extremely dangerous because it would damage the younger generation, including those from traditional communities. Meanwhile, the smuggling of weapons gave more opportunities to those who use them to escalate the conflict. (Sk4, interview, 2 April 2022)

Native Papuan communities are concerned about illegal routes because its existence put those living on the border at risk. Uncontrolled illicit cross-border activities can pose threats from individuals or gangs to any community member, threats against women (rape, trafficking), and threats against children (child abuse, trafficking) (UNOCHA 2009).

The border crossers could simply pass through the illegal routes because the security forces had not fully managed to control them. “The governments of Indonesia and PNG continue to coordinate to address security issues in these illegal routes” (Sk1, interview, 31 March 2022). However, so far, the immigration authority still has trouble stopping the arrivals of undocumented border crossers and the inflow of illegal goods, including illicit drugs (*ANTARANEWS.com* 2021).

The Growing Concern over Security

During the pandemic, security forces partnered with health workers to provide health services to the community, including those in remote areas. In addition, the security forces also played a vital role in maintaining order in case of a shortage of necessities. Their presence was becoming increasingly important to ensure stability as the violent conflict involving the West Papua National Army (TNPB) did not subside during the pandemic (Perkasa 2020).

However, the presence of security forces during the pandemic raised concerns among traditional communities. Even though it did not occur at the border area, due to the inharmonious relationship with the security forces after unresolved cases of human rights violations in the past, the traditional

community in Nduga refused aid delivered by the Indonesian military and police (Pademme 2020).

The actions of the resistance groups during the pandemic evoked two responses at once: raising concerns among traditional communities and encouraging the security forces to strengthen their presence. Attacks from resistance groups hindered the distribution of aid from the central or local government to the community. This kind of situation worsened the effects of the pandemic on traditional communities (Solahuddin 2021). Traditional communities required an influx of aid and health services. They would find it difficult to get if the attacks or ambushes continued, thus worsening their condition, which was already bad before the pandemic. As a result, the presence of security forces was critical, as recounted by an informant below:

It was necessary to reinforce security so the health services could reach traditional communities. At the border, efforts to prevent the spread of the pandemic from and to neighbouring countries could not rely on one institution, namely the Ministry of Health. Strong coordination across institutions, including with security forces, was required to guard the crossing points. (Sk1, interview, 31 March 2022)

On the other hand, the reinforcement of security to assist health services generated mixed reactions among traditional communities. Some welcomed the reinforcement, but some were worried about it: “Amid the lack of health facilities for those who accepted it, the health services provided or supported by the security forces were a relief. Access to health has always been the case, even before the pandemic” (Sk5, interview, 2 April 2022). For some, they ended up avoiding the health services provided for fear of the security forces who were on duty: “People tended to avoid the security forces; only in an emergency did people encounter the security forces” (So4, interview, 7 March 2022). In addition, “there were still quite a few members of the traditional community who were not proficient in Indonesian, so they could not communicate fluently”. As a result, “they avoided services from *Pusat Kesehatan Masyarakat* (Public Health Centre) and relied more on traditional medicine during the pandemic” (Sk6, interview, 2 April 2022). Vaccination was also a problem in the field. In some districts, the presence of the military and police to support the work of the medical unit caused the community to reject efforts to promote vaccination. It was not easy to convince people to be willing to be vaccinated. Their suspicions arose with the presence of the security forces (Christiani and Halim 2021).

The involvement of security forces in the distribution of aid and health services during the pandemic caused concern for communities in general. Concerns were growing louder when the number of security forces continued to increase due to the widespread armed violence between security forces and resistance groups (*BBC News Indonesia* 2021). It was not just the pandemic that made the atmosphere uneasy. The atmosphere was getting tenser with the escalation of armed violence (Zamzami 2020). The Native Papuan communities were worried about “capitalising on fear and uncertainty” over the pandemic, as was happening in many borderlands in conflict areas, such as Colombia. Both security forces and resistance groups were taking advantage of the pandemic to consolidate power (Idler and Hochmüller 2020). This situation raised concerns that security tightening would persist even after the pandemic ended. Consequently, ease of movement and passage would not return to normal as in the pre-pandemic era. For traditional communities at the border, it seemed that this change would be part of the new normal life.

LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS

According to the community security literature, threats against communities can include threats from the state, threats from other states, threats from other groups of people, threats from individuals or gangs, threats directed against women, threats directed at children, and threats to self. UNOCHA has identified threats to community security, including sectarian-conflict and ethnic violence, religious conflict, and other identity-based issues. During the pandemic, native Papuan communities at the border area experienced difficulties in conducting traditional economic activities; disruption in kinship, cultural, and traditional relationships; illegal border crossers; and growing concern over security. All four identified challenges are generally tied to one of the threat categories from the community security concept, threat against identity, values, and traditional relationships. Other threats, such as sectarian conflict and ethnic violence, are absent. However, it is crucial to underline that threats against identity, values, and traditional relationships have emerged as an implication of the COVID-19 virus indirect and intangible threats. This finding presents a new perspective that the community security concept should include indirect and intangible threats adding to the direct and tangible ones already identified in the current conceptual explanation.

In the context of native Papuan communities, insecurity during the pandemic existed due to health issues that impacted the lockdown as part

of government regulation of COVID-19 prevention. The closure of border posts and border markets disrupted traditional economic activities and social cohesion of Papuan communities. Under the human security concept, health issues such as pandemic is a focus of health security, apart from community security. However, one subset of human security could influence other aspects. This research shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, health security impacted community security.

Another point to emphasise is that illegal cross-border activities carried out by communities for economic reasons, such as hunting and farming, may threaten border security. Therefore, in border security management, it becomes necessary to accommodate the needs of traditional border crossers while at the same time encouraging people to participate in border security so that border security management gets direct community support.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the community security of native Papuan communities in the border area of RI-PNG. This research reveals that the closure of cross-border posts and border markets has disrupted traditional economic activities and the sustainability of kinship, culture, and traditional relationships. Dissatisfied with the lockdown imposed by the Indonesian and PNG governments, the traditional border crossers took advantage of illegal routes to continue traditional activities. However, they were also very concerned about cross-border criminals exploiting the same track. There is a growing concern that the security approach to ensure the protection of citizens during the pandemic will continue and prevent traditional cross-border movement from returning to normal conditions.

The four identified challenges refer to threats against identity, values, and traditional relationships. They emerge as implications of the COVID-19 virus indirect and intangible threats, adding to the direct and tangible ones already identified in the current conceptual explanation. The pandemic naturally is a focus of health security apart from community security. However, this study shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, health security impacted community security. During the pandemic, the illegal cross-border activities carried out by communities may threaten border security. It becomes necessary for border security institutions to accommodate the needs of traditional border crossers while at the same time encouraging them to participate in border management. For this purpose, the government must recognise the presence

of vulnerable individuals and communities. By including them as referent objects, the government will be capable of analysing both tangible and intangible threats so that border security management can be more effective and inclusive.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Throughout the data collection process, confidentiality was ensured, and informants were provided with adequate information regarding anonymity and voluntary participation in the study.

NOTES

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