

POLICY REVIEW

COVID-19 and Papua's education momentum

Garry Poluan¹ | ACER Discover, 4 May 2021

In the 13th century, the Mongol invasion was a looming crisis over Java. A visionary, Raden Wijaya, took the opportunity to crush his rival by allying himself with the invaders. It gave him access to a new technology called cannons, which allowed him to build an empire of unprecedented reach, a basis for modern Indonesia's geographical boundaries.

Golden opportunity can come with crisis. Prices are a bargain and the playing field is leveled. As the digital divide between western and eastern Indonesia persists, Papua, Indonesia's easternmost island, struggles with online learning in the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, it may just be the right crisis to invest in Papua's ICT for education, the core prerequisite to online learning.

A 2015 study by the educational sector's Analytical and Capacity Development Partnership (ACDP), a partnership between the Indonesian government, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Australian Aid, and the European Union (EU), identified at least three essentials for incorporating ICT in Papua's education system. First, there was a need to increase awareness among educators of ICT's importance. Approximately 70 per cent of teachers in Papua used technology solely for administrative purposes and for preparing lessons not for supporting students' learning. While the schools' ability to provide proper facilities was certainly a factor, the study also found high ownership levels of laptops and smartphones among students, indicating that the use of ICT for learning was indeed possible. Second, there was the classic need to ensure the availability of ICT infrastructure. Third, there was a need to prepare educators so that available tools would be appropriately utilised.

The first need is the toughest to fulfil. While the provision of ICT infrastructure and training programs is by and large within the provider(s)' control, it takes a lot of time and effort to shift a mindset. For instance, up until 2019, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) struggled with low completion rates. This was despite having some of the biggest names providing their courses. It proved how shifting students' mindset to complete courses online, as they would typically do offline, was no simple task. Another example is the usage of whiteboards. Despite having been available since the 1960s,

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classrooms only began to replace chalkboards with whiteboards in the 1990s, as the advent of computers required classrooms to be free of dust.

Inevitability is the only way to hasten a drastic behaviour change. This is what the COVID-19 pandemic does best. The closing of schools proves the inevitability of ICT in education. The pandemic has reduced the cost to increase educators' acceptance of ICT to zero. In other words, on behalf of the investors, it has completely bargained a price component to make an impact in Papua's education system. The only required investment remaining is the relatively simpler ICT infrastructure development and educators' training.

This is a rare golden opportunity for the government, philanthropists, and impact investors. It is the first time in a while that Papuan educators are on a level playing field with their peers in the rest of the country. The most senior and skilled teachers in high-performing Java are not spared from the need to learn how to develop online courses. Everyone is figuring out the tools simultaneously.

The opportunities exist on various fronts. In terms of infrastructure, while providing general connectivity to the internet lies largely in the government's hands, opportunities for private funding and public-private partnerships exist for providing connectivity to schools, teachers, and students. Assuming general connectivity remains scarce in Papua, the solution may not even have to be online. Onno W Purbo, an IT expert, spoke in a recent event organised by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) about alternative tools to online learning, such as Raspberrypi3 and at least 16 GB memory to carry digital books and learning contents.

The opportunity for private funding and public-private partnerships is also present in providing ICT devices and technical assistance. Furthermore, the ACDP study mentioned the need to develop a fitting monitoring and evaluation system to ensure these ICT tools' proper use. There are plenty of education experts that can assist in such a development. Similarly, the burden to upskill educators in using ICT can be shared with private principal and teacher development institutes.

This is a story of capturing a golden opportunity, and the legacy it leaves behind is the impact it generates. Whatever the solution, the pandemic is the golden opportunity to leave a lasting and impactful legacy for education in Papua. (*)

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