



Back to Basics

While decentralization puts pressure for education on schools and communities; an ADB project encourages Indonesian parents to send their children to school.



Bali - On Bali's west coast, 3 hours from the tourist crowds of the island's capital Denpasar and popular beaches of Kuta, Nusa Dua, and Sanur, is a hidden world of poverty that visitors rarely get to see.

Jembrana - about 120 kilometers west of these tourist areas - is Bali's poorest district, where poverty levels approach 40%. Yet, outwardly, it is deceptively picture perfect, as with much of the Indonesian island. Kilometers of well-paved roads lead past neatly manicured rural communities, picturesque Hindu shrines, and stunning rice terraces overshadowed by distant volcanoes.

But this is a district where unemployment and underemployment are high, wages are low, and many people depend on casual or seasonal labor, mostly in the fields and on fishing boats. Such work nets them the equivalent of little more than \$1 per day - about the cost of a single drink in one of Kuta's clubs. That leaves little for basic subsistence, let alone health and education.

One such laborer is Antiri, who is in her mid-30s but looks much older, her skin hardened by years of outdoor toil. "I am from a poor family," she said. "I have to work hard if I want to put aside some money to pay for schooling of my children."

One of her children, Susilo, while a student at Jembrana's Negara 4 Junior Secondary School, received help under a scholarship-supported by the ADB-funded Decentralized Basic Education Project which operates in the province.

"We give the parents 60,000 rupiah (Rp) (\$6.50) for equipment and clothes," explained Juminah, the school's principal. "Three days later, the parents are required to report back to us what they have bought - bags, shoes, books, or uniforms." These funds go to the neediest children who are identified by the village head, school committee, and teachers.

The scholarships though are just one small part of the Decentralized Basic Education Project which operates in nine districts in Bali, nine districts in Nusa Tenggara Barat (West Nusa Tenggara), and two districts in Nusa Tenggara Timur (East Nusa Tenggara). Coverage was expanded to the two districts of Nusa Tenggara Timur in June 2005, and encompasses some of the country's poorest provinces with among the lowest national enrollment rates for provincial primary, junior, and secondary education.

The project - supported by an ADB loan of \$100 million and a Government contribution of \$25 million - was approved in November 2001, and is designed to encourage poor families to send their children to school and to allow them to complete at least 9 years of basic education.

A key plank is the refurbishing and rebuilding of schools, with ADB approving in April 2005 the reallocation of \$10 million from its original loan to reconstruct 33 schools in Simeulue District, Aceh that were destroyed by the tsunami of December 2004.

Cofinancing support has come from the Netherlands, which in March 2006 committed \$28 million to expand the project into the additional six districts in Nusa Tenggara Timur.

Education for All

Indonesia's drive to provide universal basic education, which covers nine years of primary and junior secondary schooling, predates by more than six years the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 of achieving universal primary education by 2015. The country set an initial target of 2003. But as the economy reeled from the 1997 Asian financial crisis and political turmoil, this was deferred to 2008.

According to ADB's Key Indicators of Developing Asia and the Pacific 2003, Indonesia's net enrollment ratio in primary education fell from 95.4% in 1995 to 92.2% in 2000, following three years of economic and political turmoil. The decline was

similar to that seen in other crisis-afflicted nations.

At the same time, the country has been wrestling with decentralization. Effective January 2001, management and financing of basic education were devolved to district governments. Basic education was previously managed centrally through complex and compartmentalized structures in three ministries.

"The move from central control to decentralization puts great responsibility on the planning, monitoring, and evaluation on the district offices, schools, and communities themselves - and you have to build capacity for that," says Dedi Karyana, the project's secretary in Indonesia's Ministry of National Education.

The project is equipping the schools and districts to fully cope with the challenges - and opportunities - posed by decentralization, explains Cecile Gregory, Principal Project Specialist and mission leader for the project. "The schools can now take charge of education rather than be centrally planned. The project aims to help this process so that the children will stay longer in school, achieve improved results, and have a curriculum that better serves their needs," she says.

Since the academic year started in July 2003, the first funds from the project have been disbursed to 783 schools in the two island provinces. About 1,000 more will receive funds in the next academic year. Apart from the scholarships, these funds have been used mostly for light to medium physical school repairs and quality improvement, including the purchase of new books, reading aids, or training to upgrade the competence of teachers.

As the schools prepare the plans themselves, accountability to the local community for every rupiah spent is crucial, explains Mr. Sugiana, the project manager at the district education office. "This is the first time block grants have been channeled directly to schools for the school committee to manage," he says. "We go to great lengths to ensure transparency so that parents and the school committees know how the money is being used."

The schools post their accounts under the project on notice boards for all to inspect and conduct outreach activities to ensure transparency. For example, headmistress Juminah reaches those that cannot or will not see the accounts by having the reports read out at local community meetings.

To ensure community participation in the school's rehabilitation, Mr. Sugiana says that local skills are being harnessed, which also cuts the costs of the work. "Local communities have contributed through their time and labor to help improve the conditions of the school, and have also given money directly," he adds.

Physical Repairs

In Jembrana, the project is slowly transforming some of the dingiest parts of the schools from physical wrecks to being clean and functional.

Cratered, dusty concrete floors in the classrooms have been replaced with new white tiles, dirty scuffed walls have been replastered, and dangerously worn bamboo thatched ceilings have been replaced.

One such school is Yeh Umbul 3 Primary School in Mendoyo Subdistrict, where the headmaster Suama says, "The classrooms here were in a critical condition. We have repaired three out of five of them." Besides gleaming bright rooms, the project is bringing electric lighting to the refurbished classrooms for the first time.

A few kilometers down the road, Embang Kauh 2 Primary School is hoping for connection to the electric grid from counterpart funds in the next stage of the project. An average of 40 children aged 7-11 are crammed in each of the six dark classrooms, which get only limited natural light from the neighboring paddy fields. "When the weather is rainy and dark, we don't ask the students to study in these rooms, we try to find some other activity for them to do," says headmaster Nurawa.

The poor conditions are matched by the state of the teaching aids. The students' books are ragged and overused. The school is soon expecting new books provided by the project.

In its first year, the physical improvements and school grants under the project are making a mark. Education officials say the dropout rate for basic education (age 7-12) has dropped from 5% two years ago to 0.02% in 2004, while the gross enrollment rate has risen by 117% from less than 90% over the same period.

But education remains an uphill struggle for the poor in Jembrana. "I am thankful for the extra money, otherwise I would not be able to send my daughter to school," says fisherman Narka, whose 11-year-old daughter, Noviasitini, receives scholarship money at Negara 4 Junior Secondary School. When asked what she wants to be when she grows up, Noviasitini immediately says: "A doctor." Her father cuts in, laughing: "I don't have money for that."

Attaining such a level of education may seem an insurmountable challenge to this father and child. But the message is getting through that education makes good economic sense for poor families, whose children will have higher earning potential, even if they may never fulfill all their dreams. And for headmistress Ms. Juminah, that provides a ray of hope.

"I try to motivate parents and children and stress the importance of finishing school, as motivation to attend school has been low in this area," she says. "Now they are beginning to respond. I hope that these children in the future can now have a

better life than their parents."

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