

## POLICY BRIEF

# USE OF REGIONAL LANGUAGES TO TRANSITION TO BAHASA INDONESIA



INOVASI is an education program partnership between the Governments of Indonesia and Australia. It aims to find and understand ways to improve student learning outcomes - specifically those related to early grade literacy and numeracy at the school and classroom level.

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 Inovasi Untuk Anak Sekolah Indonesia  
 INOVASI Pendidikan

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## WHY DO REGIONAL LANGUAGES MATTER FOR INDONESIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM?

Research from the Global Education Monitoring body, appointed by UNESCO, found that 40 per cent of the world's population don't access education in a language they understand.<sup>1</sup> This situation occurs in Indonesia on an even larger scale due to the diversity of regional languages across the country. Based on language mapping conducted by Indonesia's Language Agency (*Badan Bahasa*) in 2015,<sup>2</sup> a total of 659 regional languages are spoken as a mother tongue in Indonesia and each of these has dialectal or sub-dialectal variations. It is estimated that there could be as many as 1,318 Indonesian mother tongues.

As a result of this language diversity, many Indonesian children are disadvantaged and fall behind their peers from the beginning of schooling. At an INOVASI event held in the Ministry of Education and Culture in March 2019, the Head of the Ministry's Language and Book Agency, Dr Dadang Sunendar, mentioned that approximately 79 per cent of Indonesians communicate mainly in their mother tongue. This is especially true of children in rural and remote areas and contributes to the disparity in education outcomes between urban and rural children. Ten of INOVASI's 17 partner districts are categorised as disadvantaged districts. These are all four districts in Sumba and all partner districts in West Nusa Tenggara. Among other challenges, a major problem is that there is no clear operational regulatory framework or technical methodology for using mother tongue as a transition to Bahasa Indonesia in the early grades. At university level, there is no program preparing teachers to use mother tongue for early graders in primary school.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The Indonesian government, through its Language Agency, is committed to a policy of prioritizing *Bahasa Indonesia*, to preserving regional languages, and to strengthening foreign languages. As a member of the United Nations, Indonesia is committed to supporting language diversity and preserving people's mother tongues.<sup>3</sup> The medium-term national development plan (RPJMN 2015-2019), known as *Nawacita*, Book II, under the section on empowering curriculum and its implementation states that:

'...the curriculum has to increase the multiple potentials, interests and intelligence of students, as well as to provide opportunities for using mother tongue, apart from *Bahasa Indonesia*, as a language of instruction in the teaching and learning process.'

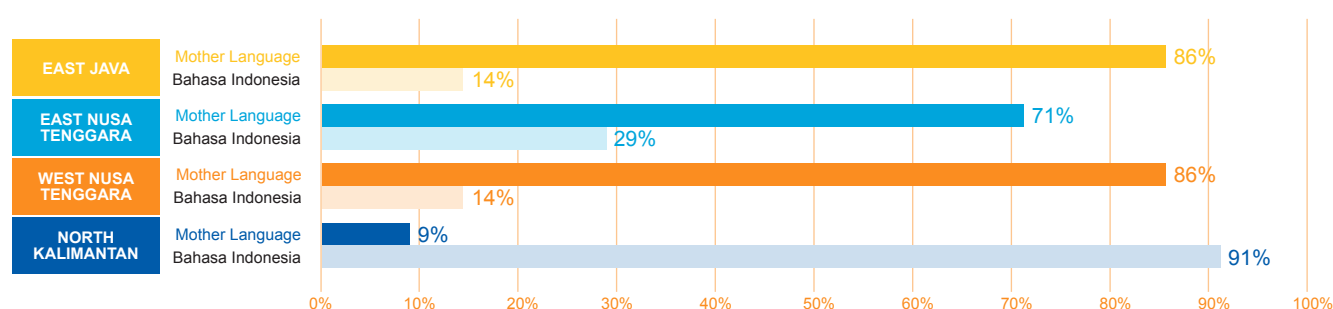
In a footnote it states further that mother tongue may be used at least up to grade three of primary school. Law No 20 of 2003 regarding the national education system allows for the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in the early grades at primary schools. As stated in Article 33, paragraph 2:

'...a regional language can be used as an introductory language in the early stages of education if needed in the delivery of certain knowledge and/or skills.'

In practice, however, this regulation is difficult to implement.

Mother languages are quite prominent in many INOVASI partner schools, except for North Kalimantan, as shown in INOVASI's 2018 baseline data<sup>4</sup>:

FIGURE1: PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN SPEAKING MOTHER LANGUAGE VS BAHASA INDONESIA



<sup>1</sup><https://en.unesco.org/news/40-don-t-access-education-language-they-understand>

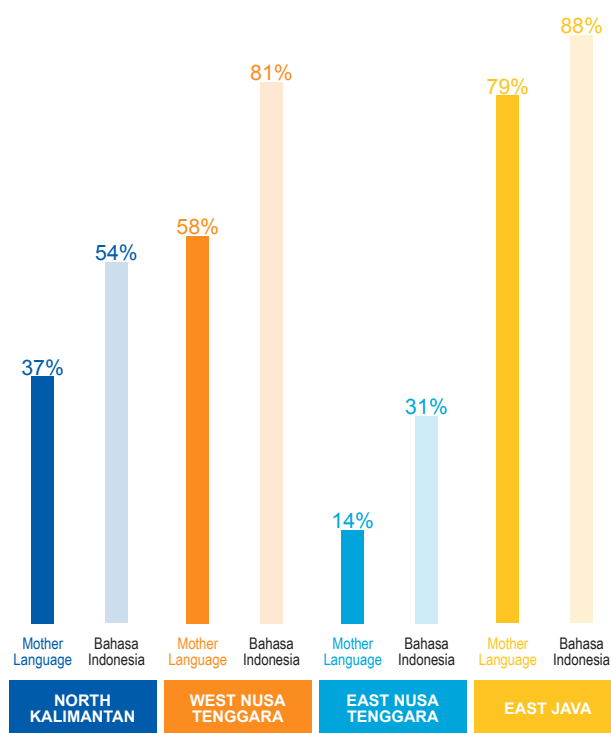
<sup>2</sup>Republika. Wednesday, 2<sup>nd</sup> Maret 2016

<sup>3</sup>UNESCO 2000, 2001, 2009; UN 1993, 2008; UNGA 2002, 1992

<sup>4</sup><https://www.inovasi.or.id/en/publication/infographic-preparing-a-generation-for-the-21st-century-the-case-for-improving-early-grade-literacy-and-numeracy/>

Moreover, students with Indonesian as a mother language tend to have higher literacy and numeracy test results than students with regional languages as their mother language:

FIGURE2: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO PASSED THE BASIC LITERACY TEST



Through pilots in Bima and East Sumba, INOVASI found that, although oral mother tongue instruction is permitted in early grades, there are no written materials or pedagogical training for helping children acquire the written form of their mother tongue. These strategies for acquirement include teaching media using both languages, and teaching methodology like the 50:50 classroom language approach.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES?

### Mother tongue language reach

Most Indonesians speak a mother tongue in their community rather than *Bahasa Indonesia* – they speak the language found in the area in which they live. Many early grade teachers experience difficulties using *Bahasa Indonesia* as the mode of instruction because most early class students still use mother tongue to communicate. In some schools and classrooms children speak diverse languages so teachers may be unfamiliar with the students' mother tongues and some students may not speak the same mother tongue as others.<sup>5</sup>

### Transition strategies

There is no clear, agreed methodology for using mother tongue as a transition to *Bahasa Indonesia*. Few districts or cities have adopted strategies to transition from mother tongue to Indonesian in the learning process during the early grades.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, teachers and principals still have doubts and feel sceptical about using mother tongue as the language of instruction and learning in the classroom.

### Lack of teaching guidance and support

There are no text books, teacher guides or, in most contexts, reading resources for beginning readers in local mother tongue languages. In addition, grade criteria for meeting language competencies (KMM) allow only for competency in *Bahasa Indonesia* – teachers can't afford the time to develop proficiencies in mother tongue.



<sup>5</sup><https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/176282/ino-mother-tongue-multilingual-education.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.sil.org/sites/default/files/files/mtbml\\_implications\\_for\\_policy.pdf](https://www.sil.org/sites/default/files/files/mtbml_implications_for_policy.pdf)



# POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## NATIONAL

Policy recommendations for successfully supporting and using mother tongue in the classroom at the national level include:

1. The Ministry of Education and Culture could develop and issue technical guidelines related to the use of mother tongue languages and modes of instruction in early grade classrooms as well as for the transition of the language of instruction from mother tongue to *Bahasa Indonesia*. Any new regulations should open opportunities for local government and schools to innovate and find local approaches, rather than defining a one size fits all approach which may restrict innovation and may not be appropriate for all contexts.
2. A policy framework could be developed to clarify what can and cannot be achieved through use of mother tongue in early grades, based on affordable levels of provision. Based on this, effective practices in using students' mother tongue as a transition to using the Indonesian language as the language of instruction need to be developed and disseminated.
3. The role of the provincial language centre could be extended to the district level in regions where there is a high diversity of regional languages. The national language centre (*Balai Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa*) should also be involved, along with province level education quality assurance centres (LPMP). A mother tongue language study could be conducted to provide the basis for local policy. Districts with a variety of local languages could also create a technical implementation unit to be responsible for implementing and using the mother tongue as the language of instruction and for the transition to *Bahasa Indonesia*.

## DISTRICT

Policy recommendations for successfully supporting and using mother tongue in the classroom at the district level include:

1. Provinces and districts can be encouraged to develop implementation guidelines for using mother tongue as the language of instruction. To support these guidelines, the district education office can form internal working groups on language and literature, which can work with stakeholders to implement the use of regional languages in classrooms.
2. For provinces that have a homogeneous regional language across districts, regional regulations for provincial and district governments can be issued for local language use in schools.
3. Local governments can actively foster and develop the use of mother tongue languages and provide in-service training and guidelines to strengthen the transition to Indonesian.
4. Early grade teachers can be taught the local mother tongue so they can help with transition strategies to Bahasa Indonesia.
5. Where possible, reading books based on local culture and contexts, using the local mother tongue and Bahasa Indonesia, should be made available in schools.

*This Policy Brief was prepared by INOVASI and the Center for Education Policy Research, from the Ministry of Education and Culture's Research and Development agency.*

*Data includes results from INOVASI's baseline and endline studies in partner provinces West Nusa Tenggara, East Nusa Tenggara, North Kalimantan and East Java.*