



Indonesian Education at the Crossroads of Political Commodities and Sustainable Development Goals

By

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Introduction

Education is one of the essential aspects for economic growth, poverty reduction, transforming people's behavior towards a more productive direction, and accelerating the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.¹ Several survey institutions revealed that low access and quality of education is one of Indonesia's top ten problems that needs to be addressed by the government.² Not surprisingly, education-related issues are often discussed in the run-up to elections.

Campaigns on Education Program of Elected Candidates Versus Human Development Index Scores

As documented through online media, at least 18 out of 26 provincial-level regional head candidates in the 2018 and 2020 Regional Head Elections included education in their work program. The programs are presented in the table below, that illustrates how attractive the issue is in the eyes of the public.

Province	Candidates for Governor and Vice Governor	Work Program or Statement Related to Improving Education Quality
Provincial Level Regional Head Election 2018		
North Sumatra	Edy Rahmayadi - Musa Rajekshah	Making education one of the five Priority Aspects of Provincial Development ³ and improving equality in the quality of educational facilities in public and private schools. ⁴



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Riau	Syamsuar - Edy Nasution	Providing an affordable education. ⁵
South Sumatra	Herman Deru - Mawardi Yahya	Providing scholarships for students who wish to pursue education in agriculture. ⁶
Lampung	Arinal Djunaidi - Chusnunia Chalim	As one of the nine priority programs, it focuses on improving the quality of secondary and higher education. ⁷
West Java	Ridwan Kamil - Uu Ruzhanul Ulum	Smart class for all universities in districts and cities, free education for economically vulnerable populations, and <i>Pesantren Juara</i> (Championing Islamic Boarding School). ⁸
Central Java	Ganjar Pranowo - Taj Yasin Maimoen	Political education and community empowerment by instilling spiritual and national values through education, training, and community assistance. ⁹
East Java	Khofifah Indar Parawansa - Emil Dardak	Free education and development of religious education. ¹⁰
West Kalimantan	Sutarmidji - Ria Norsan	Realizing the construction of quality school buildings, guaranteeing access to education for children up to senior high school, and facilitating adequate school supplies (e.g., school shoes). ¹¹
Bali	I Wayan Koster - Tjokorda Oka Artha Ardana Sukawati	Free Education. ¹²
West Nusa Tenggara	Zulkieflimansyah - Sitti Rohmi Djalilah	Education as a vital sector in improving human resources' quality while accelerating other sectors' development. ¹³
East Nusa Tenggara	Viktor Laiskodat - Josef Nae Soi	Four Transformation Movements (Infrastructure, Facilities, Funding, Academic Staffs) in education ¹⁴ and sending 10,000 youth from East Nusa Tenggara abroad. ¹⁵





Provincial Level Regional Head Election 2020		
West Sumatra	Mahyeldi - Audy Joinaldy	Providing special allowance of IDR 2.5 million for teachers and education personnel of senior high schools/vocational high schools/special schools in disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost areas; at least 20% of public senior high schools/ vocational high schools accommodate poor students; construction of school facilities at the senior high school/ vocational high school level; and providing one thousand scholarships to study at home and abroad. ¹⁶
Bengkulu	Rohidin Mersyah – Rosjonsyah	Providing scholarships to poor students through the Bengkulu Welfare Card (<i>Kartu Bengkulu Sejahtera</i>), free tuition fees for high schools and special schools, scholarships for outstanding students, ¹⁷ and facilitating disability-friendly schools. ¹⁸
Jambi	Al Haris - Abdullah Sani	Providing scholarships to poor and high-achieving students through the <i>Cerdas Mantap</i> Card, ¹⁹ adding classroom facilities at the high school level, and developing vocational schools. ²⁰
Riau Islands	Ansar Ahmad - Marlin Agustina	Education is one of the seven flagship programs focusing on improving facilities and infrastructure, teacher competence, and education services through free schools and scholarships. ²¹
South Kalimantan	Sahbirin Noor – Muhidin	Improving link and match-based vocational education that produces human resources in accordance with demands from the business sector. ²²



North Kalimantan	Zainal Arifin Paliwang - Yansen Tipa Padan	Two of the ten priority programs are the realization of 16 Years Compulsory Education and the provision of Income Improvement Allowance for Educators. ²³
Central Sulawesi	Rusdy Mastura - Ma'mun Amir	Accommodating free education through the Central Sulawesi Welfare Card (<i>Kartu Sulteng Sejahtera</i>). ²⁴

Tabel 1. Campaigns of Elected Provincial Level Regional Head Candidates²⁵

However, unfortunately, the campaign was not in line with the Development Index (see appendix) obtained by each region. A release from the Global Data Lab found that the Human Development Index at the national level decreased from 0.710 in 2018 to 0.705 in 2021.²⁶ The average decline of 0.005 point was also experienced by 17 of the 18 regions above (except for North Kalimantan).²⁷ The calculation of this index accommodates 2 of the 4 assessments derived from Sustainable Development Goal Number 4.²⁸

The decline in the quality of education, as observed through achievements in the Human Development Index, experienced by regions campaigning for the “importance of education” signaled that efforts to promote education were still not executed seriously by the government and used as a mere vote-seeking instrument.²⁹ The Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, referring to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessment which ranks Indonesia 74th out of 79 countries, confirmed that the quality of Indonesian education tended to decline.³⁰

Analysis

Schiefelbein and McGinn do not deny that the reconstruction of education is not free from interventions of political elites in office.³¹ In essence, their role is not only to diagnose problems and design high-level recommendations, but also to develop action plans, identify risks and mitigate actions from policies, and budget in an accountable manner.³²

Unfortunately, the finding above shows that the concepts and ideas about education presented by politicians were conservative and lacked novelty. The designed programs only replicate pre-existing programs (either designed by the central government or government officials in other regions) by





only “changing the packaging.” For example, providing cash assistance to individual beneficiaries does not address the root of the problem of developing human resources.

The lack of consideration for evidence-based policy in formulating regulations at the government level has also been an obstacle in implementing quality education. Attempts ranging from digitalization to westernization seem to be attractive but do not address the root of the problems in developing the education sector. A small example is digitizing access to education in the independent curriculum (*kurikulum merdeka*), wherein in practice, schools only have limited digital devices. In addition, 52.88% of academic staffs, dominated by the older age group (40-≥65 years),³³ still do not have qualified digital competencies.³⁴

The massive acts of collusion and nepotism in Indonesia are still an obstacle, as well as the potential to degrade innovation in developing a program.³⁵ This problem is still widespread, given the weak supervisory function at the government level, which even helps to perpetuate the practice. This condition also impacts the community’s mindset, which considers that these actions can be tolerated even though they violate the law.³⁶ This mindset is undoubtedly a bad precedent for sustainability and efforts to improve the quality of education in Indonesia.

Some of these problems often create dilemmas in the education sector. Thus, concrete solutions are needed to solve them. First, in terms of policy making, intervention from societal forces, such as teachers, principals, and even students, is needed. The involvement of independent research institutions in formulating assessment instruments is equally essential to avoid bias in favor of particular regions or constituencies. In this case, the involvement of research institutions can also help the government in describing obstacles in the region’s education sector. So that the root causes of education development in the region can be carefully analyzed and the government can determine the proper education roadmap to reduce these problems, which are documented in the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan.

Another option is for the government to maximize the function of the development planning meeting (*Musrenbang*) in gathering aspirations at the grassroots level. In most cases, governments are often negligent and generalize solutions to every education problem in their areas due to the absence of community participation in the policy formulation process. Participation from the grassroots level has proven to be effective, as long as policymakers at the village to city/district levels prioritize accountability and are not biased towards the interests of certain groups. This aspiration





can undoubtedly be a reference for the government in formulating a contextual policy tailored to each region, accompanied by supporting data from the government. Of course, this will support the effectiveness of budget allocations that have been adjusted to the context of the problems in each region.

The government can also improve itself by developing human resources and supporting facilities inside and outside the school. This policy tends to be minimally implemented by policymakers who prefer to allocate budgets by providing cash assistance to individuals, especially students. Aside from being prone to corruption if not monitored, the aid is also unlikely to be utilized by student guardians or schools to benefit student beneficiaries. This policy may be an unpopular opinion in the eyes of the public, but it has a real impact in maximizing the quality of human resources.

Last, the role of the government in eradicating corruption, collusion, and nepotism and improving the quality of bureaucratic services is just as important. Realizing the government's commitment to supporting clean government is essential in improving the region's education quality. The government can start minimizing such practices by implementing transparent, objective, accountable, and systematic employee recruitment, including in the case of the auction of echelon positions, which is often accompanied by bribery or buying and selling of positions. Of course, based on their credibility and competence, elected officials and educators can support improving the quality of education and development in the area.

Conclusion

Efforts to improve the quality of education are still mainly in the form of narratives in the political candidates' campaign promises. Improving the quality of education is based on more than just the results of assessments, such as PISA or the Human Development Index.³⁷ Improving the quality of education also intersects with reducing inequality and improving people's living standards.³⁸ Therefore, the importance of implementing quality education by the government is needed and can be realized according to the context of each region.





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Appendix

Table of Human Development Index by candidate pairs of Provincial Level Regional Heads for the 2018 and 2020 election periods, before and after taking office as Regional Heads (Source: Global Data Lab, Nijmegen School of Management of Radboud University).

Provincial	2018	2019	2020	2021	Index Growth
North Sumatra	0.702	0.709	0.702	0.697	-0.005
Riau (include Riau Islands)	0.722	0.728	0.721	0.716	-0.006
South Sumatra	0.702	0.709	0.702	0.697	-0.005
Lampung	0.7	0.706	0.699	0.694	-0.006
West Java	0.712	0.719	0.711	0.707	-0.005
Central Java	0.709	0.716	0.709	0.704	-0.005
East Java	0.708	0.715	0.707	0.703	-0.005
West Kalimantan	0.684	0.690	0.683	0.679	-0.005
Bali	0.736	0.742	0.735	0.73	-0.006
West Nusa Tenggara	0.695	0.702	0.694	0.69	-0.005
East Nusa Tenggara	0.654	0.66	0.653	0.649	-0.005
West Sumatra			0.733	0.728	-0.005
Bengkulu			0.72	0.716	-0.004
Jambi			0.703	0.698	-0.005
South Kalimantan			0.694	0.689	-0.005
Central Sulawesi			0.69	0.685	-0.005





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