



Thailand Conference on Reading 2013



Rainbow Reading Gardens: A Grassroots Initiative Encouraging
Children in Eastern Indonesia to Tap Into Their Imaginations

TK
park
อุทยานการเรียนรู้

Nila Tanzil

okmd สำนักงานบริหารและพัฒนาองค์ความรู้ (องค์การมหาชน)
สำนักนายกรัฐมนตรี

The paper present at Thailand Conference on Reading 2013

March 21-22, 2013

King Petch Room, Asia Hotel Bangkok



Rainbow Reading Gardens: A Grassroots Initiative Encouraging Children in Eastern Indonesia to Tap Into Their Imaginations

Nila Tanzil

I. Introduction

The world's largest archipelago, comprised of more than 17,000 islands, Indonesia is home to more than 245 million people, 800 local languages, 350 ethnic groups, and boasts one of the largest socio-economical gaps in the world. From rural farmers, who live on less than \$2 a day, to urban billionaires, Indonesia, The world's fifth most populated country in the world, is home to some 240 million people and a host complex problems, from divisive social issues to political strife. From an economic perspective, there are more than 100 million Indonesians struggling to get by on \$2 a day or less and half of Indonesia's rural poor do not have access to clean water. With these staggering numbers comes a puzzling question: Is education the most important issue facing Indonesia? Can the government properly serve the marginalized population and provide equal access to education to those who live in remote areas, or is it the job of the public to take matters into their own hands?

In 1994, Indonesian government took a huge step in the right direction when it announced its "Nine Years of Free School Program," which meant public school students from grades 1 to 9 would be given free education across the board. However, the implementation has not been smooth. In reality, parents still have to buy uniforms and books for their kids at school, plus ancillary additional fees like registration, building maintenance fees, which when compounded, became unaffordable for parents living in rural areas and getting by on \$2 a day. As a result, according to figures released by the Ministry of Education in 2010, Indonesia was home to 1.3 million dropouts between the ages of 7 and 15 years old. Only 55 percent of marginalized Indonesian children even complete junior high school. Living on less than \$2 a day, most parents cannot afford to send their children to "free" public school.



Of Indonesia's 33 provinces, Eastern Indonesia is home to four of the highest percentages of illiteracy, Papua (36.1), West Nusa Tenggara (16.48), West Sulawesi (10.33) and East Nusa Tenggara (10.13)¹. Limited infrastructure and human resources directly contribute to these staggering numbers. People who live in the remote areas of Eastern Indonesia live a very simple life with no electricity or access to fresh water, let alone the privilege of having a school in their village. Most elementary school children walk—some more than two kilometers—to class each morning. If those young children graduate and want to continue to junior high school, the parents have to send them to a “bigger” village where the children live with their extended family. Most families simply cannot afford to lose a helping hand around the farm or house, let alone pay for room, board and transportation in a neighboring village.

Local languages also contribute to Indonesia's alarmingly high illiteracy rate. Outside of school, hospitals and government affairs, the Indonesian national language, known as Bahasa Indonesia and adopted throughout the country in 1928, is rarely employed. With limited infrastructure and human resources in place, far away from the provincial capitals, people rely on local languages, which vary from village to village. The immediate language barrier makes it difficult for children in remote areas, who employ their local language everywhere else but inside a schoolroom, to learn to read and write confidently using the textbooks provided by the government. Everything in public school textbooks is written in Bahasa Indonesia, not in their local language.

¹ Ministry of Education & Culture, 2012



II. Background of Rainbow Reading Gardens

a. About the Rainbow Reading Gardens

Taman Bacaan Pelangi [Rainbow Reading Gardens] was established as a volunteer-based initiative meant to address the complex issue of illiteracy on a personal, grassroots level.

Rainbow Reading Gardens is a non-profit organization that establishes children's libraries in remote villages of Eastern Indonesia. The mission is to nurture children's interest in reading as well as provide access to quality children books for the kids, focusing on ages 5-13, living in remote areas of Eastern Indonesia.

Children who live in these remote areas have limited access or even no-access to quality children books. Most schools do not have libraries. If they do, library collections are comprised of school textbooks and sadly a majority of the time the libraries are locked by the teachers—and only opened during recess—giving the students less of an opportunity to foster a love of reading.

The first Rainbow Reading Garden was established on December 5th, 2009, in the village of Roe, in West Mangarai, Flores, East Nusa Tenggara. It was a perfect location because the public elementary school in this village only has 90 students and a smaller, more intimate number made RRG easier to start its first library project.

b. The Concept

The concept of Rainbow Reading Gardens is a library full of children's books, free of charge, located in the center of the community or village. It is a place where children can read comfortably and enjoy books without being told what to read by a teacher or pressured to pick up this book or that book. The young children are free to explore a range of subjects in an effort to foster a loving relationship with reading. Gardens are located either at the home of a doctor, priest, village head or community/cultural hub. Thus, the children can feel more relaxed and they can even read in the grass or by the beach! Children can only read the books on the



spot, they are not allowed to bring the books home. This is to avoid books being ruined by the salty water and limiting the possibility of the book falling in a rice paddies during the walk home.

Rainbow Reading Gardens (RRG) relies on the local communities to manage the library. This is a collaborative effort, where RRG provides books—anywhere from 500 to 1,500 books—in exchange for a reading and learning area managed by a volunteer. This in-kind exchange ensures the sustainability of the project. The local people are also responsible for coordinating and managing regular book rotation with the other libraries, so each RRG location cycles through a new collection of books every six months.

Because RRG continues to run as a grassroots organization operating on a shoestring budget, the project is founded on voluntarism. None of the people involved in the RRG are paid. Volunteers are the lifeblood of the Gardens. The downside of every voluntary system is commitment. Since maintaining the Garden is not the volunteer's regular source of income—their main source of income comes first—managing the library comes second. The upside to this system is that operational costs remain pleasantly low, as there is no regular monthly expense to pay the salary for the people across the 25 locations. The system is optimal for a small organization like Rainbow Reading Gardens. Meanwhile, because libraries are located in remote villages where access to good books is very limited, volunteers are excited about the chance to bring good quality books to their village and eagerly raise their hand to be a part of RRG. Villagers often refer to the libraries as a “light” in the darkness. Bringing hope for a brighter future for their children and their neighbor's children as access to books opens up each child's imagination and fosters creativity through the books provided in the library.

People who manage the libraries—teachers, doctors and religious leaders—display a nourishing passion for education. However, some of the best and most inspiring library “managers” are farmers, fishermen and young adults, who share a hunger for books and



understand the importance of education as well as what it means for the future generations of the village.

When it comes to reading, Indonesia has not crossed the love of reading chasm. An alarming rate of parents do not see a love for reading as something they should pass on to their children. They do not read to their children at night or applaud them for being able to read out loud in front of the family. Therefore, change starts with the children, and encouraging them to fall in love with books and pass that love on to their children, by reading to them every night and providing them with quality books a generation from now. Since RRG's mission is to nurture children's interest in reading, Rainbow Reading Gardens focuses on providing children's story books—fables, folktales, comics and encyclopedias—to the kids. The focus is to foster an exciting relationship, this means providing access to books with a lot of colorful illustrations, books that are simple and fun to read early on in a child's life.

Rainbow Reading Gardens also invites volunteers from around the world to inspire children through sharing sessions arranged at various library locations throughout the year. The men of the villages RRGs works with are mostly farmers or fishermen, while the women are mostly housewives. Meanwhile, volunteers who live in the bigger capital cities, or tourists passing through Indonesia on vacation, are invited to visit Rainbow Reading Gardens and share personal stories regarding their profession. Pilots, journalists and business professionals not only make for good role models, but are, more often than not, people who are excited to share their professional experience with the children in an effort to inspire them. Their stories are a great source of inspiration for the children living in remote areas. These children are not exposed to such a vast range of professions from around the world. They've never had the chance to talk to a pilot or a journalist. They've only seen planes or seen adults reading newspapers. Having someone come talk about their professions opens the child's imagination and provides them with a better understanding about the options they have for the future. The children do not have to follow their parents' profession as farmers or fishermen, they can be



something else and it takes a big dream to become big. This volunteer-initiated program inspires the children and encourages them to dare to dream big.

c. The Locations & Beneficiaries

Over the past three years Rainbow Reading Gardens has establish 25 children's libraries on 10 islands across Eastern Indonesia:

- East Nusa Tenggara: Flores Island, Komodo Island, Rinca Island, Papagaran Island, Kukusan Island, Timor Island
- West Nusa Tenggara: Lombok Island, Sumbawa Island
- Maluku: Banda Neira Island
- Sulawesi Island

Twenty out of the 25 RRG locations do not have access to electricity. Four of the 10 islands have limited access to fresh water.

The population of each village varies. One village can be as small as 70 families, with 40 students registered at the elementary school, while other villages are home to as many as 20,000 people.

The 25 Rainbow Reading Gardens impact the lives of more than 3,000 children, between in the ages of 5 to 13, across Eastern Indonesia. These children visit their local Rainbow Reading Gardens at least once a week depending weather conditions and their proximity to the location. Some libraries are open every day, depending on the passion and schedule of those volunteers managing the library.

d. What Makes Rainbow Reading Gardens a Good Sample for a Larger Group?

Based on Rainbow Reading Gardens' experience over in the past three years, here are the lessons that translate directly to burgeoning community organizations planning to establish children's libraries in remote areas:



- **Understanding Your Target Audience.** If the local community does not speak English, it would be better to provide books in the language the children best speak and understand. This may seem obvious, but because across the world English-language books are more prominently published and at the ready, organizations gladly take the books. But if the volunteers and the children do not confidently speak and read English, the books will simply gather dust. This is often the case in the most remote and rural areas of Indonesia. Again, impact is the most important thing, not simply dumping books in a village and walking away. Providing English books is essential to motivate children to learn, but English books should not represent—most children actually prefer books about animals in their local language—the majority of the collection in the library. Providing the children with books in national language is important, considering these children only speak their local dialect/language in their daily life.
- **The Physical Building Should Not Intimidate People.** It is important to house the library in a place that offers both the volunteers and the children an overall welcoming and friendly feeling. An ominous and modern building might not be suitable or comfortable for people who live in remote villages as it will make them feel intimidated and uncomfortable to approach and enter the library. A simple, locally designed area suits the local people best. One has to consider the psychological factors of a location and one has to create an atmosphere in which people will feel at home when they come to the library, especially considering that library locations are donated in-kind by the local community.
- **The Right Location of the Library.** The right location is the key to success. The best location is right in the center of the village, or a place in the village the children and parents pass through often. The location also serves as an advertisement, or reminder for the kids to come and read.



- **Flexibility.** Some areas of Eastern Indonesia are very far behind in terms of literacy. For example, on Timor, there is a RRG library located in a village where most students do not learn to read until the fourth grade. Therefore, the library has to be able to cater the needs of the children. Even though in most of RRG locations the target age is from 5-13 years, considering kids' reading skills, some areas should practice flexibility and allow teenagers feel comfortable entering and enjoying in the library together with the younger children.
- **No Money Involved.** Rainbow Reading Gardens remains dedicated to the volunteer system. RRG does not want to make the local community dependent on the organization in terms of money. It is better to give the village the fishing net, than simply hand them the fish day after day year after year. Giving the local community money does nothing to improve their future or put the wheels of education in motion. Thus, it is important to make the community understand that this project is completely volunteer-driven and dependent on like-minded people—from the community and beyond—working together to make this project run smoothly for the benefit and betterment of the children.
- **Capacity Building Programs Are Key.** Considering the lack of human resources in remote villages, it is essential to have a capacity building workshops for the volunteers who manage the library. Not only does capacity building help bolster the efforts of the volunteers, giving them new skills and letting them share their thoughts and ideas with others, capacity building workshops serve as a way for Rainbow Reading Gardens to openly thank and publicly recognize volunteers for their hard work, service and dedication.
- **Book Rotation.** For a small, grassroots organization like Rainbow Reading Gardens, book rotation systems help provide fresh books to each library every six months without the volunteers and managers having to purchase their own books. As a



source of empowerment, volunteers are asked to speak up when they think it is time to rotate books or exchange their stock with another of the 24 libraries.

III. Testimonials

When discussing the obstacles and barriers volunteers encounter while running and maintaining the libraries each individual has his or her own thoughts and feelings, yet we tend to see a pattern.

Aventus Abu, Roe Village, Flores says, *“The kids in our village have the potential to be successful, however, they aren’t supported by good facilities, which enable their minds and imaginations to grow. Not only that, the locals here do not understand the importance of education or how important it is to the next generation of kids. The education level in Eastern Nusa Tenggara is very low compared to the other provinces in Indonesia.”*

Yuliana Miman, Paka Village, Flores says, *“Our biggest challenge is facing parents who do not understand the importance of reading and education. They think it is all the school’s responsibility to create and foster a love of learning.”* She continues, *“There are books written 100% in English. Kids are not interested in them, because they cannot understand the content. It is OK to provide English books in the library, but please provide the translations too. The best thing to do is provide bilingual books.”*

A similar comment comes from **Rafael Mat, from Datak Village, Flores**, who says, *“In general, we still need to nurture the children’s interest in reading, because they are not used to it, it’s not something their parents encourage them to do. The parents don’t encourage their kids to read, because they themselves have little, if any, formal education. And the parents come from low economic background, so education is simply not a priority. The parents prefer that their kids help the family by fishing or working in the rice fields”.*



Parents play a big role in raising their children. Children do what they see their parents do. In this case, if they never see their parents read, they will think it is not important to read, eliminating the chance for the habit to form when it is paramount. Educating parents about the importance of reading to their kids from an early age is paramount to the success of any reading program. While a passion for reading has caught on in the urban and affluent areas of Indonesia it is still far from a popular and accepted practice in the rural areas of Eastern Indonesia.

Agustinus Jeheot, Kaca Village, Flores, *“The kids have a big interest in reading, however, I think we need more books for the library. They love books with a lot of illustrations. These kinds of books definitely attract them.”*

This comment shows that children who live in remote areas actually have a big interest in reading. It has been RRG’s strategy to provide them with illustrated books to stimulate their interest. However, a problem that occurs is that some of the volunteers,—mostly teachers—think that it is not a good thing when kids prefer to read books with a lot of pictures or illustrations, comics or fairy tales. The teacher would prefer that the children spend their time reading complicated science books with little or no images or drawings. This is another challenge. Teachers should understand that the first thing to do is to get their students to fall in love with reading. It does not matter what they read, be it comics or Japanese mangas. As long as the kids start reading, it is already good. This love will grow inside them and the children will eventually start reading everything in front of them.

Florianus Martono, Pengka Village, Flores says, *“One of the problems we face as volunteers is there is no standard method or technique that stimulates kids to read.”*

This is a classic challenge, but one should not give up on this. As a solution, RRG has conducted a two-days workshop for volunteers who manage Rainbow Reading Gardens in their villages on story-telling techniques, how to develop programs that will encourage kids to come



and read at the library as well as share their good and bad stories as a learning experience for all. For this workshop, RRG collaborates with the Society for the Advancement of Children's Literature, who has been recognized as a pioneer in this field, with dr Murti Bunanta, its founder, as the speaker for the workshop.

Miftahul Razak, Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, says, *“Children who live in the village rarely have books read to them, let alone by their parents. There is simply no access to books. There are no bookstores or public libraries or even government-sponsored reading programs.*

Beyond those challenges face by the volunteers, people who have visited RRG libraries have a positive feedback and they always felt touched seeing the excitement of the kids at the libraries when they see those children story books on the bookshelves.

Zack Petersen from The Jakarta Globe newspaper says, *“I really wish the joy that the kids get from reading at RRG would carry over to their homes at night. But the simple fact remains that none of the parents ever had anyone read to them so they don't understand the power and potential reading has. This puts the kids at an immediate disadvantage. We have to get the kids to start asking their parents why tthey don't read to them at night. And nonetheless, you have to start somewhere. So, I hope the kids that come to RRG would fall in love with reading and pass that joy on to their children and their children's children.”*

Eva Muchtar from Jakarta says, *“If you think first impressions matter, how's this: Imagine more than 60 village children of various ages sitting on the floor of a simple house, absorbed in their storybooks. They came despite a downpour. They did not chat much. Nor were they running about. They simply sat and read. Yes, that was what I thought as well. I had known about RRG's initiative for some time. But I had never fully appreciated the wonder and magnitude of the impact it has for the local children until I saw it with my own two eyes.”*



IV. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS & THE STRENGTHS OF RRG

Based on feedback and testimonials from volunteers who manage the libraries, here are some practical solutions to share:

1. Raising awareness of the importance of education and reading is essential.

This activity will give an added value to the combined efforts of everyone involved. Ask the older kids to start reading to the younger kids in their village so they understand the importance of passing on reading as a passion. This program could come in the form of a campaign established at the village level aimed at beyond. Another idea is to hold a “Love to Read” campaign, collaborating with story-tellers to stimulate children’s interest in reading.

2. On the national level, collaborate with like-minded organizations and the local and provincial government to host a national campaign on reading on publicly recognized days. Public Private Partnership is also important to raise public awareness and make educational and reading campaigns successful.

3. Approach the parents to come to the library, too, and show—not tell—them the benefit of reading. Maybe one can provide books for the parents to read in the same library with their kids.

4. Capacity building workshops for volunteers, which consists of practical methods and techniques explaining how to better nurture a child’s interest in reading and unleashing their imagination.

5. Holding fun and interactive activities, such as reading, writing and poetry competitions and exhibitions, not only stimulate the children’s imagination and sharpen their reading and writing skills, but also encourage their parents and teachers to start paying more attention on their children or students’ reading and writing habits and strengths.



It is a challenge to change the mind-set of adults, especially those living in remote areas. Rainbow Reading Gardens is striving to change people's behavior and make parents and children realize on the importance of reading, and most importantly, nurturing children who live in remote areas in an effort to enable them to fall in love with books. Through books, a whole new world, with limitless horizons opens up. Through books, children will be inspired to dream big. Through books, children will be motivated to grow, reach their dreams and embrace a bright future. Children who live in remote villages have the right to be successful, just like their friends in the big cities.

As Rainbow Reading Gardens (RRG) continues to nurture children's interest in reading, the organization pinpointed an often-overlooked strength—**networking**. For example, RRG has established mutually beneficial partnerships with other organizations that share the same concerns for children as RRG and use their expertise and acumen to help RRG achieve its objective and/or bolster RRG operations:

- a. **Partnerships with airlines.** Rainbow Reading Gardens collaborates with Transnusa (Aviastar Airlines) and AirAsia Indonesia to ship books—the biggest cost for the grassroots organization—to the remote islands. Both airlines have kindly waived shipping fees, lifting a huge burden from the shoulder's of the organization.
- b. **Partnership with yacht association.** RRG also collaborates with Indo Yacht Support and Yacht Aid Global. These two organizations help RRG to fund-raise as well as carry the books to the remote islands where their members sail with their luxurious yachts. It helps reduce the cost of shipment and creates an opportunity for those aboard the yachts to interact with the people of Indonesia and give back to the community they are visiting.
- c. **Embracing grassroots volunteers.** In order to reinforce and help sustain library projects, RRG collaborates with the local community and approaches their local leaders to be volunteers. On top of that, RRG also collaborate with executives and professionals who



live in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, asking them to participate in the project through a book drive campaign, called "Drive Books, Not Cars." This campaign also collaborates with retailers, such as Starbucks, embassies, et cetera to house drop box locations for people to donate books—Indonesia children books and English novels. Volunteers then collect the books. The children books go straight to RRG, while the English novels are sold in bazaars, as a mean for fund-raising. RRG utilizes its volunteers to hold such activities.

- d. **Using social media to garner support from individuals as well as other institutions/corporations.** Social media is king in Indonesia. If Twitter had a capital city, it would be Jakarta. There are currently 47 million Facebook users in Indonesia, making it the fourth highest ranking country in terms of Facebook users. RRG uses social media channels to gain support from individuals and associations, as well as share photos and testimonials from volunteers. Social media is also very useful to raise public awareness on RRG's campaigns in collaboration with other institutions or corporations.
- e. **Openness to network with other international reading culture/organizations.** RRG is open to collaborating with other organizations that share the same vision and concerns. The collaboration can develop into the form of activities, campaigns or voluntary work in the field. RRG believes, the more parties involved in this project, the broader coverage RRG will have, thus, the more children in remote areas can have access to good books and enjoy them and the more people the program can reach.

Rainbow Reading Gardens hopes to continue to grow and build more children's libraries as well as unceasingly inspire those children living in the remote areas of Eastern Indonesia by unlocking their imagination and bolstering their confidence through the power of books!



For more information about Taman Bacaan Pelangi [Rainbow Reading Gardens], please visit:

www.tamanbacaanpelangi.com.

Follow us on Twitter: @pelangibook.

And join us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/pelangibook.

E-mail: tamanbacaanpelangi@gmail.com

