

Feeding minds, not just bodies: why literacy needs ambitious goals

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Children receiving nutritional support at schools in Gorontalo, North Sulawesi, Indonesia

Photo Credit: Flickr/World Bank

With a budget that currently stands at Rp171 trillion (more than AUD15 billion) in 2025, Indonesia's Prabowo government has huge ambitions for the Free Nutritious Meals program (Makan Bergizi Gratis or MBG). By the end of 2025, the initiative targets **82.9 million beneficiaries** across Indonesia. Since its launch in January, **over 1,000 Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units** have been operationalised nationwide.

As an initiative to achieve the **Trisula Pembangunan Nasional 2029** goals of economic growth, poverty alleviation and human capital development, the MBG program aims to improve educational participation and achievement.

Providing free meals is a powerful first step. However, as I have **argued previously**, this investment must be measured against **meaningful performance indicators** to unlock its long-term potential.

Literacy needs more than nutrition alone; it requires consistent engagement in reading, writing and critical thinking.

This is not just about the lack of books or internet access; it's also about a literacy culture that is still undervalued. Today's generation does not lack information — if anything, it is drowning in it. What is missing is depth of thought and the ability to discern what truly matters.

There is a growing risk that information abundance leads to superficial engagement, especially when foundational literacy is still developing. Globally, there is **a growing concern** over “shallow reading” — the consumption of information without understanding. In countries like Indonesia, where foundational literacy is still developing, this issue is even more urgent.

As UNESCO defines it, literacy is not only an ability to read but also to **apply the skill** meaningfully for both individual and community purposes. Without this foundation, nutritious food becomes just another source of fuel with no impact on learning outcomes.

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The urgency of this issue becomes clear from findings that show that the quality of education in Indonesia remains troubling. In **Balinese schools**, for instance, out of 34,062 junior high school students, 155 students fall into the category of “Unable to Read” and 208 as “Not Reading Fluently”. These are basic skills that should have been mastered during primary school.

Elsewhere, **viral videos** on social media that show school-aged youths struggling to answer basic general knowledge or math questions reveal a deeper concern. The core issue goes beyond the curriculum, access to education services, or nutrition; a key missing element is critical thinking.

Indonesia’s **Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)** scores reflects this challenge. The latest scores, for 2022, in mathematics, reading and science are 366, 359, and 383, respectively — far below **the OECD average**. Furthermore, according to the 2016 World’s Most Literate Nations ranking by Central Connecticut State University, **Indonesia is placed 60th** amongst the world’s 61 most literate countries.

On paper, Indonesia shows progress, though inequality remains a key obstacle. According to the **International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)**, the country has 164,614 libraries — four national, 2,057 academic, 42,460 public, 113,541 school, and 6,552 others. Recent data further affirms this progress. In 2024, Indonesia’s Community Literacy Development Index (IPLM) rose to 73.5, up from 69.4 in 2023 and surpassing the national target of 71.4. In addition, **nearly 150 million Indonesians** actively use social media, indicating that access to information is not problem.

The government has, in fact, initiated a national literacy effort: the Indonesia Reading Movement (**Gerakan Indonesia Membaca or GIM**), which has been positioned as a part of the national literacy development strategy since 2015. It involves literacy communities, teachers and parents, aiming to build 10,000 village libraries. Coordinated by the Ministry of Education and the National Library alongside private sector and civil society partners, the program includes book donations, regional plans and public discussions.

But unlike the breakthrough MBG with its hundreds of trillions of rupiah and systematic end-to-end support, the national literacy agenda still struggles among other government priorities. In 2025, the **National Library** allocated Rp441.8 billion for literacy development, around one-quarter of 1% of MBG’s budget. It covers broad programs: reading culture, Nusantara (ancient) manuscript preservation and library accreditation — but more than Rp279 billion (38.78% of the total) was trimmed to achieve efficiencies, with attendant impacts on the relevant ministries

and regional programs.

Ideally, literacy development programs should match the MBG program in ambition, not only in funding terms but also in terms of national urgency. Without a clearer sense of purpose and greater ambition, such programs risk becoming symbolic rather than systemic.

Building a literacy culture requires inclusiveness in policies, dedicated funding and thorough, measurable implementation. It demands leadership that dares to place literacy as a foundation of education policy, not merely as an accessory for the sake of improving some students' exam scores. If the MBG program reflects a strategy to fuel the body, then literacy feeds the mind. These two things must go hand in hand.

To foster student literacy, schools must hold regular wide-reading sessions where students can choose their preferred books. This not only sparks interest and habituates students to read more but also strengthens **their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills**. At the same time, equipping teachers with inclusive and hands-on literacy training is necessary to support students' diverse learning needs.

Libraries should function as learning hubs, not just as places to borrow books or access free wi-fi. They should be centres of exploration and discussion. In remote and underserved areas, **mobile libraries** and digital literature can help bridge access gaps and support a transition toward more permanent facilities.

Beyond institutions, it is important to facilitate children's involvement in appreciative and equal discussions from an early age in environments that facilitate their training in reasoning and opinion-forming. On top of that, **digital activism** can enrich public discourse. All these strategies can be taken forward through genuine cooperation among stakeholders: ministries, schools, libraries, NGOs, social movements, influencers, the private sector and all of us as members of society.

Feeding children without teaching them to think is a half-hearted ambition. Without strong literacy skills, the investment in nutrition loses its leverage to transform the next generation into independent, critical and productive learners. If the Indonesian government truly wants to realise the Trisula Pembangunan Nasional, then it is time to recognize that literacy is not just a complementary educational outcome — it is a cornerstone of education. Nutrition energises the body; literacy builds the capacity to shape the future.

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