

# Freedom to learn needs more than teachers

By Alpha Amirrachman

Jakarta

Director of Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Regional Open Learning Center and lecturer at the School of Education, University of Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Serang, Banten

The Education and Culture Ministry has launched a list of reforms, called *merdeka belajar* (freedom to learn), which focuses on student performance assessments, classroom teaching plans (RPPs) and school zoning.

The first reform mandates a new form of assessment by which teachers have more autonomy to formulate school final exams, while the second would abolish the national exam, which is considered to be too material-heavy and too light on measuring reasoning skills.

The third reform would simplify RPPs for teachers, meaning less administrative work for teachers so they can have more time to focus on the learning process.

The last reform would modify the zoning system by reducing the number of seats allocated to students residing near each school from 80 to 50 percent, while increasing seats for those with high academic achievements.

All of these policy adjustments would bring us to the heart of education reform, which is teacher competence and professionalism. No matter how great the reform of education, including curriculum restructuring to put it in line with the Industry 4.0 era, all will be futile if teachers have no required competence.

With regard to the first and second reforms, for example, the new form of assessment that would be determined by the teachers obviously needs teachers to have the ability to comprehensively assess progress regarding both cognitive and emotional aspects of their

own students.

Hence, teachers need routine and deep individual observation to detect not only their students' strengths and weaknesses in learning, but also their mental development, talent and interests.

The third reform, RPP simplification, would need teachers to have the ability to think concisely and act practically but with expected high impacts on learning outcomes.

Here, teachers might feel it difficult to engage with this instructional reform as many feel safer in the current comfort zone. The "heavy" administrative work may actually no longer be burdensome, given the saddening routine of "copy-paste" of the RPP in preparing teaching material.

The last reform is relaxation of the zoning system. While it still exercises certain affirmative actions to accommodate students living near the school, it will challenge teachers to create a competitive atmosphere as students with high academic achievement would strive for the best.

Teachers are also expected to be able to teach students of various backgrounds, as the zoning system would also accommodate students living near the school regardless of their social backgrounds and academic levels, underlying the importance of compassion and collaboration.

Teacher transformation is indispensable. Nevertheless, numerous studies including that of the World Bank show that teacher certification programs that link lavish pay rises to improvements in qualifications have had little, if

any, encouraging effects on teachers' subject matter and pedagogical skills.

As education scholars have stated, the prime determinants of learning are competency, effectiveness and teacher motivation, which have proved lacking despite the teacher certification programs.

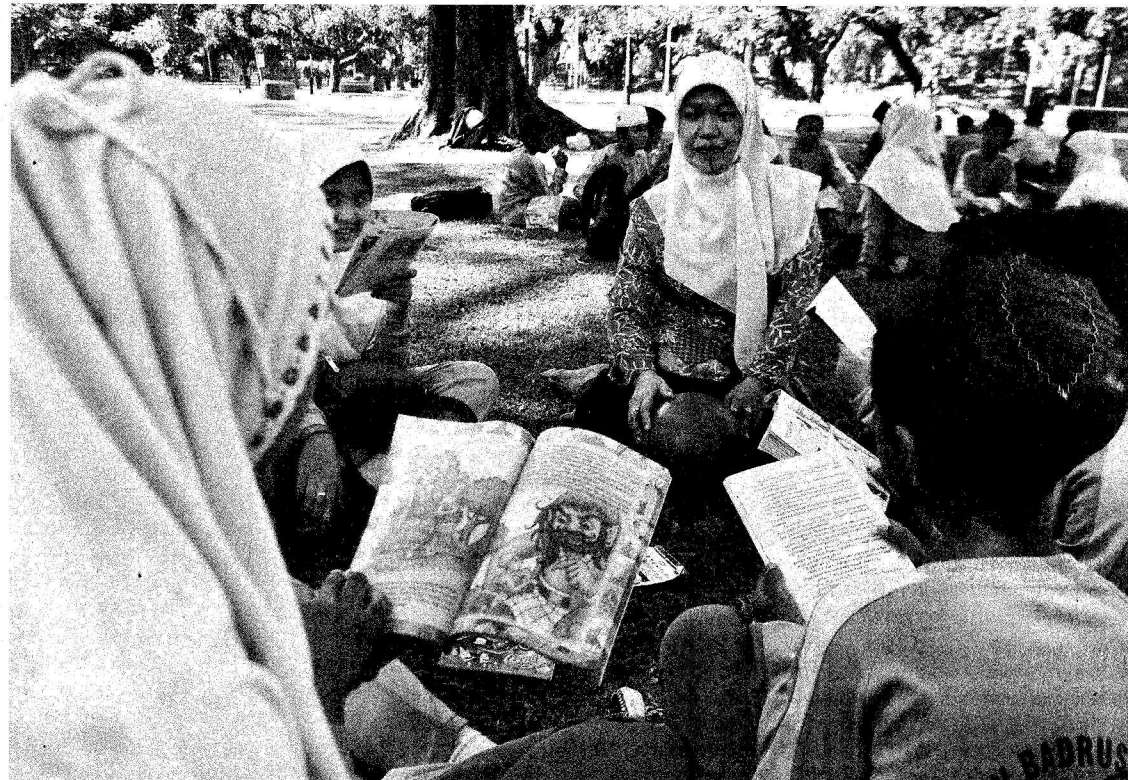
We need to be sure that would-be teachers in teachers' colleges are well-equipped with both subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. Additionally, we need to upgrade the competency and professionalism of about 3 million existing teachers, many of whom are less than qualified.

Hence, several steps need to be considered.

First, due to the certification program that offers lavish pay for teachers, the teaching profession has become attractive. As a result, now almost 1 million students are studying in teachers' colleges and about 250,000 college-trained graduates are ready to enter the market, while only about 50,000 teachers are to retire each year. Worse, more than 60 percent of teachers are contract teachers with low salaries and no job security.

Hence, strict control entry into teachers' colleges is needed to select only the best candidates with the main focus on numeracy and literacy skills, interpersonal skills, motivation to teach and willingness to improve themselves.

Second, continuous professional development should prioritize competencies, not seniority and academic degrees. This is in line with the ministry's policy of *guru penggerak* (mover teacher), by which any teacher with high competency may share knowledge and best practices with peers without strict technocratic constraints.



JP/Aman Rochman

**Learning ground:** Students of an Islamic school in the East Java city of Malang read books under the guidance of their teacher during an outdoor classroom activity. The digital era requires teachers to exercise creativity in helping students absorb knowledge.

This means government-funded Quality Education Guarantee Institutions, Centers for Teachers and Educational Personnel Development and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organizations Centers, as well as independent teacher unions, should really function as centers of excellence for upgrading teachers' competency.

These teachers should be presented with the latest pedagogical innovation and best practices from their peers not only in Indonesia, but also in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Third, careful attention still should be paid to the interchange among competency assessment, performance appraisal and con-

tinuous professional development. Likewise, professional development can be continued with information and communication technology to reach the unreachable and connect our millions of teachers in a productive networking of a big digital village.

Massive open online courses, for example, offer a relatively affordable way of scaling up teachers' knowledge and skills.

Lastly, education reform needs more than just teacher transformation. The political ecosystem should also be reformed in a way that supports the national education system.

The fact that almost all matters related to teachers are under the authority of regional gov-

ernments has proved ineffective for proper national recruitment, deployment and distribution of teachers.

Not to mention the fact that during regional elections teachers are often forced by the incumbents to become vote getters, putting them in a tricky situation that, in many cases, have jeopardized their teaching careers.

Therefore, it is worth considering returning parts of teacher management under the authority of the central government, to ensure teachers can have a proper teaching career with rewarding continuous professional development, to bring about sound student performance.

## A transformative deal for nature is needed

This October, representatives of the 196 parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) will gather in Kunming, China, to finalize a new Global Biodiversity Framework.

Like the 2015 Paris climate accord, this new agreement could mark a turning point in how we manage our relationship to nature.

But biodiversity advocates must learn an important lesson from climate activists. Global climate action gained momentum only after it became clear that the issue was about more than the environment, and would require a transformation of transport, energy, agriculture, infrastructure, and many industries.

Likewise, the rapid loss of biodiversity that we are witnessing is about much more than nature. The collapse of ecosystems will threaten the wellbeing and livelihoods of everyone on the planet. Accordingly, the CBD must move beyond traditional notions of "conservation" to engage with all relevant sectors of the economy and civil society.

Since its creation following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the CBD has been largely successful in pushing countries to establish new protected areas, such that nearly 15 percent of global land areas are now under some sort of park designation (though the share of protected marine areas is much smaller).

But despite this relative success, biodiversity loss has continued, suggesting that the creation of nature refuges is necessary but not sufficient. To slow and halt the rapid decline of species and habitats, we must address how human societies manage land and seascapes and the resources that are being extracted from them.

As matters stand, all of our economic incentives are geared toward encouraging activities that drive biodiversity loss. Agriculture, infrastructure, and urban areas are all rapidly expanding, as are extractive industries like forestry, mining, and fishing.

In addition to converting landscapes directly, these practices can disrupt natural habitats and degrade much larger areas, by creating access points for illegal hunting, logging, and other activities. Pollutants, runoff, and industrial and agricultural water usage cause still more damage.

A mere 5 percent of the planet's land surface remains unaltered by human activities, and that

By Linda Krueger

Project Syndicate/New York

Senior policy adviser at The Nature Conservancy

share is likely to shrink further unless we institute changes soon.

A 2015 study by scientists from The Nature Conservancy finds that if current trends hold, the construction of roads and energy infrastructure (including renewables), together with mining and agriculture, threatens to double the conversion of remaining intact wild areas in South America, and to triple converted lands in Africa by 2050.

Responsibility for protecting the natural world has traditionally fallen to environment ministries, park managers, and conservationists, all of whom will be at the negotiating table this year.

But to be truly transformational, the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework must also involve finance, planning, transportation, energy, and agriculture officials, particularly those with the clout to effect change across entire economies.

**Projects should be required to compensate for biodiversity loss by investing in the restoration of degraded or deforested lands.**

Agriculture ministries, for example, are critical for maintaining natural habitats and protecting biodiversity corridors for pollinators and other wildlife.

To slow habitat conversion, governments can make agricultural subsidies conditional on environmental considerations, and require foreign agribusinesses to prove that imports are produced without converting natural habitats.

Similarly, energy generation, transportation, and infrastructure are all major drivers of biodiversity loss, requiring more robust planning and mitigation efforts by ministries far beyond those charged with conservation.

Whether by regulation or incentives, governments must do more to minimize the impact of these activities on nature. And when avoidance is impossible, projects should be required to compensate for biodiversity loss by investing in the restoration of degraded or deforested lands. To that end, the new framework

should establish guidelines for how specific sectors can improve over time.

Ensuring real accountability and transparency requires a clear agenda. But what, specifically, should countries be accountable for? The Nature Conservancy has proposed a metric based on the "net gain for nature," which would enable parties to show year-on-year improvements in the condition of natural habitats, and of biodiversity within production landscapes such as agricultural lands.

Admittedly, this kind of indicator is harder to measure than are more standard benchmarks such as protected acreage. But with new low-cost spatial technologies such as global positioning systems (GPS), geographic information systems (GIS), and remote sensing, the data needed to measure progress is well within reach.

Ideally, we would assess the conditions of every habitat at a global scale, forming a detailed understanding of all ecosystems. And with these data, we could then monitor progress in habitats by country, ecoregion, or biome.

Saving nature is not a task for government alone; it must be a whole-of-society effort. Even with optimal legislation and enforcement, governments probably cannot eliminate all of the main drivers of biodiversity loss. Support from business, local governments, indigenous communities, civil-society groups, and faith-based organizations will be essential.

A sector-based approach that supports "net gains for nature" can be a platform whereby all stakeholders will make voluntary commitments to our broader goals.

The international community has less than one year to negotiate a framework capable of transforming our relationship to nature.

If governments want the CBD meeting in Kunming to be a turning point, they will have to engage in the hard work of overhauling how we manage our land and sea resources through all stages of extraction, production, and consumption. That can happen only if negotiators recognize that the Global Biodiversity Framework is not just a matter for environmentalists.

## In elusive grip of abusive partner: A migrant's story

By Fairuz Ahmed

Inter Press Service/New York

To live in a home with family, to have a safe environment, food and basic human necessities, are some of the essentials that most people expect to have without giving it all much thought.

When a child is born, parents or caregivers are likely to provide these things. These expectations get renewed whenever someone gets married and moves to a new home, a different neighborhood, or a city.

We can hardly find someone who will say that they were not expecting happiness and safety when stepping into a new relationship, or starting a new chapter of life. But these expectations of a better life turn disastrous for millions of people when they step into another country as a dependent.

For most immigrants coming to the United States of America, it seems like a golden gate to happiness, safety, security and all the perks of life. First generations of immigrants come with a mentality of struggling and achieving their dreams while maintaining their traditional and cultural ways.

They invest in making their dreams come true, but at the same time, they long for the lost traits of their old home and societal practices as they adjust to new ways of life.

They try to hold strongly to their roots and expect their children to be moral citizens of the US, successful and accomplished, yet having a love for their home country which they, themselves left behind.

The second generation of immigrants has their lives a little bit more sorted. They are given steadier lives compared to their parents, but in return, they face the constant challenge of adjusting to two types of very different societal paradigms and customs.

For instance, when it comes to people from the Asian community, the children born and raised in the US, are expected to marry a girl or boy from the country of origin of their parents. The spouse is expected to be an ideal person who upholds family values and cultural norms.

Many times people from developing countries aspire to get their children married to someone who is from the US, in hope of someday making their way into this country of dreams and in hope of their children having a better life.

This mindset gives birth to a population of dependent spouses.

The spouses of the second generation, and sometimes even of the first generations who migrate to the US are a unique segment of people who in most cases remain solely dependent on their partner to enter the US and also for their livelihood after migration.

A portion of them integrate well into society, study and hold jobs eventually after the move. But the majority fails to spread their wings, becoming a burden and potential targets for abuse.

They remain dependent on their spouses for, a long period of time, and are severely governed by the spouses, in-laws and are forced to stay imprisoned in their own homes.

The real scenarios, truth, and consequences remain in a gray zone, silenced and hushed. Women become victims of other's high expectations. They become the means by which others carry out frustration.

A study by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crimes in 2019 estimates that of the 87,000 women who were intentionally killed in 2017 globally, more than half (50,000- 58 percent) were killed by intimate partners or family members, meaning that 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day.

From the Global Database on Violence against Women, some national studies were done and it shows that up to 70 percent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.

The US is a developed first world country, provides benefits and assistance to anyone under threat and abuse, and that is a relief to hundreds of people.

Various organizations, NGOs, governmental institutions and social workers help save many women and children from the grave and severe situations at home.

However, victims mostly live under the poverty line and remain invisible for most parts. The language barrier, lack of friends and family in this country, helplessness, and void of financial stability makes matters exponentially worse.

Newly arrived immigrant women whose immigration status has not been permanently established, or are undocumented, conditional residents or whose

visas have special needs, somewhat live at the mercy of their partners.

Most often, these women are manipulated with unsettled immigration status as a means of continuing their abusive relationships.

Their passports, social security cards, certificates or any other important documents are held by the partner or by the families they come into.

They are constantly harassed and intimidated by threats of abandonment, their children are threatened to be separated and harmed if they communicate with others, and their entire financial situation is monitored and handled by the abusers. Often abusers threaten to harm their family back home too.

I myself am a survivor of 15 years of emotional, financial and physical abuse by my partner. I am also an immigrant woman and mother of three daughters. My children and I were abandoned in Asia, despite being US citizens.

We were barred from coming back, denied access to our home in the US, and left without any sort of financial help. Moreover, I faced identity theft and my social security details were compromised after being announced deceased by my spouse.

Starting from detection and identification of abuse, speaking up and seeking help, reaching out to authorities, participating in therapy and counseling for myself and for my children, going through self-restoration and healing periods, and lastly through rebuilding our lives,

I have gathered valuable insights about patterns of abuse and overcoming it. I have been working closely with various organizations in New York City and have met and talked with hundreds of women who are victims of abuse by their spouses, partners, and family members, and are from immigrant families.

I have volunteered and sought help from organizations including SAKHI: for South Asian Women, Safe Horizon, Chaya CDC NYC, Womankind, and with Make the Road New York.

It is my hope that others can be brought to awareness through the sharing of my story, and through the discussions of the root causes that can cause these situations.