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# The Life of Papuans, the Native People of Indonesia's Largest Treasure Island

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## **Abstract**

Papua is a land blessed with abundant natural resources, yet its wealth is not enough to save its people from poverty. As many as 27% of Papuans still live below the poverty line, a sad reality triggered by some social issues, such as constant conflicts, low employment rate, ineffective implementation of the national curriculum, and poor learning environment. All these issues inhibit the learning progression of Papuan students, which is a key factor in ending the vicious cycle of social injustice issues in Papua. Nonprofit organizations have tried to help Papuan students to get a better education through the disbursement of scholarships and other forms of donations. However, these actions are still not enough to solve the education issue in Papua, as it remains until today. For that reason, the problem needs to be solved from the core, which can be done by creating a safer environment to better support Papuan students in their study and modifying the implementation of the national curriculum at the local level to better suit the needs of Papuan students. Giving Papuan students the right tools to succeed will allow them in the future to do what is right for the place they call home, Papua.

**Keywords:** Papua, education, social injustice, poverty, natural resources, conflict, low employment

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Papua is a land with highly promising opportunities that it owns in the form of its abundant valuable natural resource producers (e.g., gold mine, copper mine, gas field, and production forest), yet its native people are still struggling to make use of those resources as an opportunity to improve their lives. 27.53% of Papuans are living below the poverty line, which is the highest poverty rate in Indonesia (Statistics Indonesia, 2019, as cited in The Jakarta Post, 2019). Also, the poverty rate only dropped 0.47% from 28% within two years (Firdaus, 2017). This unfortunate condition is caused by several problems, including the bad education system in Papua. Two major education inhibitors are unsupportive condition and ineffective national curriculum implementation. Unsupportive condition is caused by conflicts triggered by tribes and separatist groups that killed many non-Papuan teachers and low employment rate (Anderson, 2013, as cited in Hermino, 2016; CEIC, 2018). Ineffective national curriculum implementation is caused by the national curriculum's inability to accommodate Papuan students' needs (Smith & Sobel, 2010; Munroe et al., 2013, as cited in Sianturi, Chiang, & Hurit, 2018). These two major problems have worsened the education condition in Papua and caused Papuans to be one of the most illiterate groups of people in Asia (Firdaus, 2017). Without being properly educated, Papuans cannot make good use of their natural resources, and they will also struggle to find jobs. Although many organizations have helped Papuan students by providing scholarships and other forms of donations, the education problems in Papua still exist because these organizations do not solve the problems from the core. Therefore, to solve these problems, the education system in Papua needs to be fixed from its core by setting up a supportive conducive learning environment and changing the curriculum that suits Papuan students better.

One of the solutions that two individual education researchers (Hermino and Azzizah) agree on is improving the learning environment of Papuan students. Hermino (2016) recommends the use of school-based management – a breakthrough suggestion which increases the role of parents and community to improve students' learning performance by creating a conducive learning environment and/or providing any necessary help. He also urges the government to stabilize Papua, increasing its safety level. Besides having a low safety level, Papua also has economic problems, and so Azzizah (2015) suggested the improvement of the economic condition in Papua because “the bigger the poverty rate in a province is, the harder it is for its families to afford school” (Azzizah, 2015, p. 228).

The improvement of the learning environment in Papua is important because it could help students focus on their studies and reach their potential. Hermino's school-based management solution is thoughtful because he understands the students' concerns that they will struggle to advance with only getting help from teachers, who they meet for only 6-8 hours a day. Students need guidance from their parents, especially during after-school time. Furthermore, students also need a conducive environment to focus on their studies. Such a condition cannot exist if the place that they live in often has conflicts. As for Azzizah's solution, her idea of lowering the poverty rate in Papua is logical because if the students' parents are unemployed, the students might be asked by their parents to work even during school days (usually during the after-school time) to contribute to their family earnings. Under these conditions, students obviously cannot concentrate on their studies.

Overall, both Hermino's and Azzizah's solutions can answer Papua's education problems at first glance. Unfortunately, some parts of their solutions are quite inapplicable. For example, Hermino's suggestion to improve Papua's safety level is a big task that even the central government cannot solve for years. Nevertheless, Papua can try to at least secure schools and villages (or housing areas) by adding police officers or hiring private security guards. As for Azzizah's solution, she failed to provide any specific solution to improve the economy. In Papua's case, the government could make more jobs available for native people in Papua by employing more native people to work on new factories, plants, or mines and/or to do some defense-related jobs. Besides her solution, her argument that "the bigger the poverty rate in a province is, the harder it is for its families to afford school" is quite unspecific (Azzizah, 2015, p. 228). The argument also sounds too conclusive and not entirely true, since every government-owned school (except for some senior high schools) in Indonesia charges no cost. Private-owned schools, however, charge cost. Azzizah should have been more specific when providing a solution or an argument. To sum up, some parts of Hermino's and Azzizah's solutions are quite unrealistic and unspecific and need to be improved to enhance their applicability.

Another possible solution is to change the curriculum. Based on their research, Sianturi et al. found that Papuan students cannot benefit from using the national curriculum for some reason, such as the existence of language and cultural barriers because most indigenous people in Papua do not speak the lingua franca. Therefore, they recommend the implementation of a place-based education curriculum (which they previously have tested during their case study in a school in Papua), the use of bilingual instruction, and the recruitment of culturally-aware teachers. Similar to the school-based management, the place-based education curriculum emphasizes on the active engagement of the parents and the local community. Nevertheless, Sianturi et al. made a small but significant change by adding the appreciation of local culture and environment to the curriculum.

Through thorough research on the problems, Sianturi et al. successfully provided detailed solutions. Most of their solutions are applicable to many schools in Papua. Furthermore, their version of place-based education curriculum is thoughtful, since they also acknowledge the importance of preserving culture and nature. Moreover, the use of bilingual instruction and the recruitment of culturally-aware teachers also answer the students' needs because many students in Papua come from many different tribes, who have different cultures and speak different languages. Having culturally-aware teachers and using bilingual instruction will help them to advance in their education. To conclude, their solutions are mostly applicable and answering the students' needs.

The major drawback is that some solutions (e.g., the use of bilingual instruction and the recruitment of culturally aware teachers) are not easy to be implemented for some reason. For example, there are not many teachers in Indonesia who can speak any of 264 tribal languages in Papua. Furthermore, only a few people have a deep understanding of Papua's cultures. Therefore, universities in Indonesia should consider adding Papua's tribal languages and Papua cultural studies as new courses. The government can also help to promote the use of a place-based education curriculum in Papua by passing new laws or policies to support it. This suggested solution is a response to some controversial education regulations in Papua that have been causing many problems in their practice – suspending the education progress in Papua (Efriandi, Couwenberg, & Holzhaecker, 2019). Another suggestion on the place-based

education curriculum that can be considered is the addition of Indonesian Realistic Mathematics Education because according to Tanujaya, Prahmana, and Mumu (2017), Papuan students possess low mathematical skills, which they get from their habits of only memorizing mathematics formulas without fully understanding them. The implementation of Indonesian Realistic Mathematics Education needs to be discussed to help students reach their full potential. Other subject-specific curriculums can also be added to support the place-based education curriculum. Despite having some drawbacks, the place-based curriculum (along with its additions) can still answer Papuan students' problems of the ineffective national curriculum.

To conclude, there are many problems that should be fixed from the Papua education system. First, the bad learning environment is caused by the constant conflicts and the poor economic condition in Papua. Students, certainly, cannot focus on their studies under such unsafe and uncondusive condition. Seeing this problem, Hermino (2016) suggests the use of school-based management that asks society to build a conducive learning environment and contribute towards the education progress of Papua students while Azzizah (2015) stresses the importance of solving economic problems in Papua to also help to create a comfortable environment for Papuan students. Second, the incompatible national curriculum is hampering the education progress of Papuan students. The national curriculum cannot be effectively used in Papua because of the difference in languages, culture, and students' needs. Sianturi et al. (2018) offer the use of a place-based education curriculum – that is more suitable for Papuan students and can better meet their needs – along with the use of bilingual instruction, the recruitment of culturally-aware teachers, and the help of society. By fixing the education system in Papua, many benefits can be felt – from the improvement of education quality and living standards to the stabilization of economic conditions. The indigenous people in Papua are currently waiting for Good Samaritan(s) to come and transform their lives by providing them the proper education they always need, so that later on, they have the chance to continue striving for the better lives for which they always hoped.

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