

Enhancing Language-Culture and Economic Wellbeing of Minority Ethnolinguistic Groups in Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper presents our ongoing work on bridging the gap between language-culture well-being and the urgent need for economic well-being among minority speech communities in multilingual Indonesia. Although there has been significant progress in language documentation in Indonesia (Florey and Himmelmann 2010, Sawaki and Arka 2018, among others), the connection of language-culture wellbeing and economic wellbeing aimed at long-term language-culture maintenance is often surprisingly absent from modern documentation projects in the country.

Research from Mexico, for example, has revealed a promising link between language-culture and economic well-being. Retaining minority languages alongside dominant languages has been shown to improve job prospects and wages for indigenous Mexicans, supporting language transmission across generations (Diego and Panu 2023). The recognition of multiple languages in minority communities enhances economic well-being by facilitating meaningful societal engagement (Saarikivi and Marten 2012). Additionally, participation in traditional arts has also shown to benefit ethnic minority groups by fostering cultural knowledge, connectedness, and ethnic identity development, ultimately enhancing well-being and sense of belonging (Hinks 2012).

We discuss case studies from Merauke, South Papua in eastern Indonesia, and the Barrier Islands in western Indonesia based on our recent language and culture documentation in these regions. Using a mixed-methods approach that includes ethnography, interviews, and questionnaires, our findings reveal that minority speech communities such as the Marori in Papua, and the Enggano, and other languages spoken in Pulau Simeulu and Pulau Banyak (e.g. Haloban, Devayan, Sigulai, Leukon (Amery and Aziz, 2020) in the Barrier Islands have reached critically low vitality, necessitating urgent measures to enhance their wellbeing.

Our research highlights critical variables related to language-culture-social wellbeing, such as identity, heritage, social connection, and sense of belonging. We illustrate how local bio-cultural-ecological assets, including unique arts, dances, rituals, nature (native flora, fauna and environment) and sacred places, can be further documented, and harvested for economic wellbeing. These assets have practical economic benefits, particularly in the context of eco-cultural tourism and entrepreneurship (see picture 1), promising local employment prospects that support the preservation of language, culture, and ecology.

Through our work, we aim to contribute to the emerging interdisciplinary field of econ-linguistics (<https://econlinguistics.org/>), focusing on underrepresented communities. Our goal is to revive and enhance their wellbeing by fostering self-awareness of the connections between their local culture, language, and economy.



Picture 1: Pak Domi, a Marori speaker, with his native Papuan orchid nursery: Connecting entrepreneurship and local ethnobotany documentation in Kampung Wasur, Merauke, Indonesia.

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