



PHOTO & CAPTION

Improving Services for the Blind



Photo: USAID/Virginia L. Foley

The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, and Rising Sun are some of the 3,000-plus novels and textbooks that the Indonesian Mitra Netra—or “Friends of the Eye”—Foundation has in stock. What makes the library so impressive is that the books are in Braille or on tape. “We’ve been developing audio books since 1992,” says the deputy director, Irwan Dwi Kusnanto, who is visually impaired. With help from USAID, the foundation distributes 100 cassettes per month to 15 special schools where they are enjoyed by visually impaired adults and children. Each year, visually impaired individuals visiting the center listen to nearly 12,000 audio cassettes.

Recording Specialist Muji Hardjono, who is blind, produces 2,000 cassettes a year for the Mitra Netra Foundation in Jakarta. The Indonesian foundation encourages visually impaired children to attend regular school and helps them keep up with the rest of the class.

Bambang Basuki, who himself is blind, founded Mitra Netra in 1991 because he was disappointed with organizations that did not involve the visually impaired in determining the services they needed. “Our strength is that we know our needs,” he says.

The foundation provides other services for the visually impaired, including orientation and mobility training. It has organized a support group for parents of blind children and offers blindness counseling services. Working with the Cipto Mangunkusumo Hospital in central Jakarta, the Foundation provides counseling services to children in the Eye and Medical Rehabilitation division. It also provides visually impaired students with companions to help with writing assignments and test taking. Students are offered after-school tutoring and computer classes that teach basic skills like typing. On average, the foundation trains about 60 people a year in computer skills.

The Mitra Netra Foundation is one of USAID’s partners in its effort to increase opportunities for vulnerable children in Indonesia. The program seeks to improve access to education and support services for children with a variety of disabilities.

USAID, in partnership with the Mitra Netra Foundation, is helping children with visual impairments gain access to education and become more independent. The foundation is also enhancing lives, helping the visually impaired experience the joys that others may take for granted, like diving into a great novel.