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📷 Dame Margaret Barry OAM, founder of the Bali Children Foundation, visiting children at a school in Pedawa, North Bali. Picture: Bali Children Foundation.

We can't miss the boat on opportunities with Bali

Dame Margaret Barry OAM News Corp Australia Network

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OpinionQLD News

I'll dare to be controversial and say at the outset I believe boys are more in need of education than girls.

I'm referring to children in Bali, where girls' education is incredibly important but they are more likely than boys to continue their education up to year 12.

Boys are expected to start work and make a living earning money for their families by age 16.

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Families depend on their income, so the longer they are in school, the longer the delay in them getting a job and contributing to the household income.

In remote areas of Indonesia, life expectancy is just 62 years. In Australia, it's 82 years. That's a massive difference. A teenage son is expected to work because educating them takes up precious time that families don't have when they rely on their income to survive.

The problem with not educating boys is that their wages are stunted. They may bring home \$50-\$80 per month without graduating Year 12, but they could bring home at least \$200 a month if they graduate high school with English and computer skills.

With a university degree, wages increase significantly, truly changing individual households. Education is a clear path to growing income. But even with these numbers, boys still feel the pressure from family to leave school and start working at a young age.



 Australia could benefit by optimising technology to communicate with students from Balinese schools like this one in Pedawa, North Bali. Picture: Supplied, Bali Children Foundation

So at the Bali Children Foundation, while our focus has been on girls and boys, we have an uphill battle when it comes to keeping boys in school for longer.

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Another issue is Indonesia is still a deeply patriarchal society. Educating girls who live under the power of less educated men can cause conflict within families and indeed, within the greater society as a whole.

I've lived in Indonesia for nearly 30 years and consider it my home. I feel welcomed here, happy and connected to the village community where I live and the many rural communities where I work.

The devastating Bali bombings happened in 2002, a few years after I arrived. It was a Saturday night and after I heard the explosion, I immediately knew what it was.

It was devastating to lose so many people — 204 people died. It had a significant impact on the local community who lost so many.

But I was so heartened by the co-operation between locals, expats and tourists who helped and comforted one another in the days and weeks that followed.



📷 While retention rates for boys in Balinese schools is a constant battle, girls face different obstacles when it comes to education. Picture: Supplied, Bali Children Foundation

After the tragic bombing, so many people blamed Islamic terrorism but I believed it had nothing to do with Islam — it had everything to do with the lack of education and economic opportunities.

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That's what breeds terrorism in developing communities around the world — a sense of disconnection, of despair and the fundamental lack of income, education and empowerment opportunities. Poverty radicalises people.

The Bali bombings were the reason I started Bali Children Foundation and why I believe so strongly in using education not just for economic mobility, but as a path towards peace and stability.

With more education, there are greater employment opportunities which lead to more income. And with more income, there is usually more stability, better health and stronger communities.

I believe the most transformative thing Australia could do in Indonesia is to develop an education-based relationship.

The recent trade agreement signed between Indonesia and Australia offers great opportunities.

I implore Australia's best universities to set up satellite campuses in partnership with Indonesia's best universities, sending more Australian students to Indonesia and more Indonesian students to Australia.

Through collaborative education, relationships, friendships and future business partnerships will grow. More Australians will create business relationships in Indonesia, unlocking a market of 260 million people.

Indonesians will have access to top quality university education which will create more employment and economic opportunities for them and potential income for Australia.

The collaborative education between Australia and Bali should start at a primary school level.



📷 Founder of the Bali Children Foundation Dame Margaret Barry OAM visiting children at a school in Pedawa, North Bali. Picture: Supplied, Bali Children Foundation

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Imagine the power in creating pen pals and sister schools among our primary schools in Australia and Bali and wider Indonesia. Communicating with children from a different country, creating artwork together, sending books and writing letters would create such meaningful and inspirational relationships among both the children in Bali and the children in Australia.

Using technology, we can unlock these opportunities in real time. Such relationships are vital in creating connections between cultures that will last a lifetime.

We cannot underestimate the important relationship we should be developing with Indonesia right now. Indonesia's economy, already the largest in South East Asia, is growing at more than double the rate of Australia's.

The Australian Government currently estimates Indonesia's economy will grow to three times the size of the Australian economy by 2030. It will be the fourth largest economy in the world behind China, India and USA.

We are on the verge of missing the boat on the vast opportunities Indonesia provides to Australia and Australia to Indonesia.

Economic opportunities here in Indonesia are endless — but the educational and personal connections to be made are just as important, if not more.

I'm so excited to call Bali home and I hope many more Australians are inspired to come to Indonesia, to work here, live here and to bring our countries closer together.

Dame Margaret Barry OAM is founder of the [Bali Children Foundation](#).

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