In rural, remote areas of Indonesia, getting indigenous children to school is a struggle: almost 50 per cent of over 5-year olds in remote areas of Papua Province have never attended school, compared with 5 per cent in urban areas. Even when these children go to school, only 6 per cent of early grade students in Papua Province acquire reading skills. These low levels of enrolment and learning are likely linked to poorly trained teachers, teacher and principal absenteeism, insufficiently contextualised curricula and school being undervalued by students and parents.

In response, UNICEF launched the Early Grade Literacy (EGL) programme in July 2015 to improve the skills and creativity of teachers and to help schools provide a better learning environment adapted to the needs of students, with the ultimate goal of improving students’ reading and comprehension skills in schools, especially targeting indigenous children. Key strategies of EGL include: capacity development of teachers through regular training and mentoring; development of locally contextualised learning materials; community mobilization; and policy advocacy. Tailored instruction, a pedagogical approach which modifies curriculum and classroom practices to support children in their learning, is a vital component of EGL, providing individualised support to marginalised children. Teachers who tailor instruction in their classrooms assess students’ learning needs and adapt classroom learning activities as needed. The EGL programme used a baseline assessment to establish understanding of the learning gaps, and teachers continually assessed progress in classrooms and adjusted teaching to individual needs. UNICEF helped train local teachers in their classrooms to keep student portfolios using continuous assessments and to design flexible lessons addressing distinct learning needs, which vary across students.
During the COVID-19 pandemic, the programme adopted a blended learning approach to continue providing teacher training via online and limited in-person meetings on how to implement the emergency curriculum with home-based and catch-up teaching, directing attention to literacy and numeracy. While school closures and increased demands around COVID-19-related activities have stalled the scaling up of the programme, these conditions have highlighted the need for tailored instruction as learning gaps grow. EGL strategies now are integral components of COVID-19 education recovery plans, with UNICEF and the UN World Health Organization urging all schools to resume face-to-face learning in Indonesia.

RESULTS
Following the success of the pilot phase of EGL in six districts of Papua Province, UNICEF advocated its expansion. As a result, four additional districts have been allocating budgets and planning to implement the programme. At the strategic level, the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2018 encouraged all districts in Indonesia to prioritise literacy though programmes such as the UNICEF-supported EGL.

- From 2015 to 2018, the proportion of non-readers in lower-performing schools decreased from 62 to 26 per cent, while the proportion of adequate readers increased from 6 to 18 per cent in target schools.
- About 27,221 students (49 per cent girls) in Grades 2 and 3 have benefited from improved teaching and learning.
- Nearly 1,600 teachers and principals, many indigenous, have improved their ability to provide tailored instruction due to UNICEF-led regular training and mentoring.
- UNICEF helped develop 77 contextualised reading books at different levels, of which 56 are approved by the Ministry of Education. They come with EGL instruction guides, teaching materials and student worksheets.

LESSONS LEARNED
- Tailoring instruction to the learning levels of students is an effective way to improve learning. The EGL programme helped teachers to teach at the right level, leading to significant gains in children’s reading skills.
- For the best learning outcomes, reading materials must be culturally relevant and age appropriate. Contextualised books are more compelling for teachers and students, and they encourage children to read.
- In rural and remote contexts, teachers need mentoring and detailed instructional materials to customise instruction and teach at the right level. In Papua, most teachers had never received literacy-focused pedagogy prior to the EGL programme.

NEXT STEPS
UNICEF continues to advocate for the scale-up of EGL, which is embedded in the country’s COVID-19 learning recovery. Currently, UNICEF is finalising a roadmap with concrete milestones to be achieved at school, district and system levels.

Cost effectiveness: From 2015 to date, UNICEF invested approximately $13 million in Papua and West Papua Provinces to establish the EGL programme, develop books and reading corners, reaching over 27,000 students. Unit costs ranged from US$87 to US$110 per student per year, depending on the remoteness of the schools. Private sector partners and local governments used their own resources to invest more than US$1.2 million to scale up the pilot.