A REPORT ON PAPUA NEW GUINEA COUNTY REVIEW OF EDUCATION EQUIVALENCY PROGRAMMES AND ALTERNATIVE LEARNING

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Logistical Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country Team Leader</th>
<th>Pala Wari, Coordinator, CapEFA Project UNESCO Antenna Office, C/- Education Department, P O Box 446, Waigani, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report Coordinator</td>
<td>Pala Wari (same as above)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Country Priority Areas | 1. Policy support mechanisms  
2. Curriculum material development  
3. Modes of delivery  
4. Capacity building and training  
5. Financing and resource mobilisation |

Background

The important role played by the formal and non-formal systems (NFE) in providing an complimentary avenue in acquisition of important cognitive and life skills promoting lifelong learning generally has been regularly debated by researchers for a long time. In many developing countries, realizing that the formal education system can not cater for all their education needs, governments have began to place more emphasis on the non-formal education sector in an attempt to archive higher rate of performance in a society (Equivalency Programmes (EPs) for Promoting Lifelong Learning, 2006). There is now consensus among education researchers that to achieve the goals of EFA, both the formal and non-formal education must be strengthened through the development of equivalency programmes (EPs) for out of- school children, youth and adults.

In Papua New Guinea, EPs are described as alternative opportunities for children, youths and adults who are not reached by the formal education system. In other words, EPs are learning programmes conducted outside of the formal education system which provide opportunities of other pathways of archiving formal education or training. This view is reflected in the National Education Plan (2004-2015) which highlighted the major outcome of Flexible, Open and Distance Education (FODE) as providing: “...alternative opportunities to students to pursue other pathways to alternate education” (p70).

With more than 850 languages spoken among 6 million people living in mountainous and hard to reach isolated areas and outer islands PNG is developmentally challenging. The challenges facing marginalized groups are categorised into those related to geographical, social and economic conditions. The country’s geographical nature with rugged mountains, large areas of swampy land and rain forest means providing education services to the 85 per cent of the population who live in the rural areas is difficult. The rapidly increasing population is also a
major concern for the government. The population which is dispersed widely across the country has been growing at an average of 2.3 per cent per year. At this rate the population is projected to grow to more than 11 million in 2050 and double every 30 years. For the formal education sector, the rapid population growth require the government to provide education services at the rate of population growth. Finally, financing the expansion of the education system has become increasingly difficult because of uncertainty in the economic climate in PNG. The implications for this is under-resourced schools, poor management of resources provided by provincial and national governments and the DoE which relies on donor assistance to fund some of its core activities.

The demand for the EP to cater for children out of school (COS) as well as youth and adults is borne by the fact that large number of children are missing out on formal education. According to the Universal Basic Education Plan (2009), there were 674,000 COS in 2007, and not much in terms of programming has been developed for them. However, the phased implementation of subsidized basic education beginning with elementary schools in 2010 is expected to reduced the numbers of COS. The rate of reduction will however be slowed by system absorption capacity.

EPs have been existing in various forms in PNG. The Department of Community Development (DCD) ran Community Development Centers (CDC) support activities such as an elementary programme for the 6-8 year old children, sewing projects for young girls and mothers, sport programmes for youths and small scale farming for under privilege people and theatre groups to create awareness on the importance of continuing education for all. The centers also provide a meeting place for local authorities, community people and church groups. For students who drop out of the formal school system at the lower and upper secondary level, Flexible and Open Distance Education (FODE) programmes supported by the DoE are provided however, these programmes do not cover the elementary and primary level education.

Apart from government supported programmes most EPs are supported by non-government organizations (NGOs), the churches and the private sector. An example of a private sponsored EPs is the Digicel PNG Foundation Mobile Learning Centres (MLC) which focus on marginalized urban and sub-urban communities. MLCs are used as pre-school classes, library, resource centre and community learning centre for various kinds of training such as adult literacy, skilled-based training, cooking and sewing for women, and HIV/AIDS awareness.

There is great variation in the target groups participating in existing EPs in PNG however, most can be described as out-of-school population. This include those who miss out in accessing formal school opportunities at all levels of schools; learners from various backgrounds including industrial workers, people in the business and service sectors; disadvantage population such as urban settlement, youth, prisoners, and women groups and people with physical disabilities. In addition, other groups include those in isolated rural areas and outer islands that are deprived of education services which could need to be reached through EP programmes.

Overall, lack of political commitment in providing educational opportunities to disadvantaged groups is a concern for PNG. Experience from other developing countries shows that PNG government can demonstrate its commitment in supporting EPs and NFE starting with the formulation of specific policies in favor of EPs and the development of legal provisions. With regards to issues related to curriculum framework, modes of delivery and assessment, the establishment of regulatory institutions and development of appropriate policies that recognize the local context and ensures the provision of equivalent education to that of the formal education sector are crucial.
Priority Areas

1. Policy support mechanisms

Recognising the importance for human and social development GoPNG gives high priority to education. The national and political commitments to ensuring an educated population has often been echoed in important government deliberations and key policy documents such as the PNG National Constitution, Medium-Term Development Term (MTDS), Education Philosophy Report (2004), National Education Plan (2005-2014) and the Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government (1995) and Universal Basic Education Policy (2009).

Education Philosophy Report (2004), stressed that the formal school system is responsible for the education of the children on behalf of the state however, this responsibility should not be regarded as the only agent for change. The National Education Plan (2005-2014) contends that opportunities for flexible, open and distance education will be enhanced to provide alternative and comparable pathways for students and adults to complete their education. In proposing this strategy the government realize that the formal sector by itself is unable to meet all the education needs of the country therefore non-formal education sector needs to be enhanced. More recently introduced Universal Primary Education Plan (2009) defined basic education as covering 9 years from elementary to Grade 8 as compulsory education.

An analysis of the content of the documents point to the paramount importance of providing a educated population to enhance nation development. Given that the formal education system is struggling to provide for the education needs of the country the recognition of non-formal education by supporting and placing more emphasis on alternative pathway for education is the strategy that many countries such as PNG is now considering seriously.

While Papua New Guinea’s constitution clearly made a commitment for “the right to education” the absence of appropriate policies on NFE and EP’s has resulted in very little progress made in supporting the development of EP’s over the years. There is no denying the fact that a strong political commitment in favor of the education of disadvantaged groups is an essential pre-condition in planning EPs. However, for PNG the absence of appropriate policies and legal provisions means current efforts are poorly coordinated.

For the future, it is obvious that the development of an appropriate legislation that clearly states the equivalency of the two education systems- formal and non-formal, as well as the importance of a legislation that clearly identifies the government agencies responsible for coordinating all NFE and EPs at the national level is a priority task. Further, a review of the current national education act which provides the legitimacy not only for EPs, but also for accreditation and certification needs to be taken account of.

2. Curriculum and Learning Materials Development

Lack of policies on national standards of competencies and preparation of national curriculum for NFE and EPs means there is no standard curriculum for EPs in PNG. Many of the EPs currently in operation, especially those targeting elementary, primary and secondary type education, use similar curriculum and materials as that used by the formal school system. The
content of the curriculum is often academic oriented and does not serve any specific needs of learners. There are others who prefer to use the old FODE materials which are similar to that provided by the formal school system curriculum.

The current formal education use the outcome based education (OBE) curriculum which is competency based. Key competencies are identified and learners acquire proficiency in the use of these competencies in order to qualify for a certificate. Thus, learning materials are in the form of competency-based modules which contain objectives, expected learning outcomes, activities and evaluation.

Where EPs use the formal education curriculum the current practice require schools to seek the National Education Boards’ endorsement to be recognized as “permitted institution”. The process involve institutions to be inspected by school inspectors to ensure they meet the minimum requirements before they are officially recognized as permitted schools. This status allows the students to sit for the national examinations and the schools receive national government funds such as the national education subsidy.

For EPs that provide for the needs of youth and adult, the curriculum is often designed around local conditions and potential as well as the needs of target learners. This means the curriculum does not conform to the traditional subject approach of the formal system and emphasizes on life skills through work-oriented programmes and the development of basic skills that adult learners need to function effectively as parents, workers and members of the community.

The question PNG will have to dwell on is whether EPs should have a national curriculum framework in the interest of maintaining quality and ensuring standards, or whether curriculum development should be decentralized in order to ensure the relevance of curricula to the needs and interests of various client groups, or a combination of both needs to be deliberated on carefully. While following a national curriculum framework has its advantages, best practices in other countries show that it is still possible to develop learning materials that draw upon the life experiences of typical NFE learners in order to equip them with the knowledge and skills useful for solving the problems of daily life.

3. Delivery modes

The absence of government policies on EPs means there is no regulatory body at the national body to determine how the organisations should play their roles as implementers of the programme. There is also no separate organisational structures which support EPs in Papua New Guinea although the number of organisations that support NFE programmes and EPs has been on the rise over the years.

The current EPs which are designed to meet the different needs of learners are delivered by a wide range of organizations including government, private, social and religious organisations that carry out community-based NFE activities at the community level. For EPs that offer equivalent elementary, primary and secondary education, classes are usually provided in formal school environment with classrooms and teachers following a school programme similar to that of the formal school system.

Other EP programs include youth development centers, vocational centers, college of distance education, women and adult literacy classes, community development centers, special target group, NFE center and adult education schools. Many of these programmes occur in appropriate and convenient places for learners such as mining camps, plantations and shop
while others are held in centers were formal training are conducted or are delivered through institutions that carry out community-based NFE activities.

4. Assessment, accreditation and quality assurance

PNG has no formal national policies which recognise the outcomes of EPs as being equal to the outcomes of formal education programmes. Further, the importance of legislation that identifies the agency conducting examinations at the national level and deal with accreditation and certification are also not in place. This means important EP issues with regards to assessment, accreditation and quality assurance will have to be dealt with if the EP is to developed in the country.

However, in the case of EPs which offer equivalency primary and secondary education using the formal education curriculum, and are recognized by the National Education Boards’ as “permitted institution”, the issue of equivalency is not a problem as the students sit the same formal education national examinations and are assessed for a place at the next level of education together with students who attend the formal education schools.

Within each organisation and programme two kinds of assessment and evaluation of learning outcomes are applied: (i) individual self assessment and (ii) final examination of programmes. Individual self-assessment is integrated into each module where learners measure their performance by responding to problems posed in the exercises and by completing the learning activities provided in the modules. Post learning assessment includes the use of non-formal assessment methodologies such as portfolio assessment as well as pre- and post-module and other forms of assessment. Thus, there are no formal assessment based on curriculum framework and learning materials administered by a national body.

Ideally, for the development of EPs a legislation that clearly states the equivalency of the two education systems, as well as the importance of a decree that identifies the agency conducting examinations at the national level is the way forward for the future. However, for the immediate concern with regards to quality issues the development of techniques of conducting the assessment and evaluation of learning outcomes especially for EPs which provide programmes outside of the formal education curriculum is an important issue to address.

Concluding remarks

Recognizing that basic education is a fundamental driver of a country’s economic and social development, GoPNG has reinforced its commitment to compulsory basic education through the development of UBE Plan (2009). The UBE Plan translate the education goals into tangible strategies and interventions to address basic education challenges in PNG. While accepting the argument that children are entitled to an education and the opportunity to make better life for themselves unfortunately, significant number of children are continuing to be denied the benefit of basic education. It is now clear that the formal education by itself will not be able to cater for all the education needs of the country therefore, the NFE sector need to be enhanced.

With the EFA target date of 2015 approaching fast, the challenge for GoPNG, and many other developing countries which are not likely to reach EFA Goals, is with regards to type of strategies and policies that needs to be developed and implemented to accommodate the important NFE sector. More specifically, the inclusion of EPs to enhance the national education
progress rate closer to EFA targets. Finally, of the four priority areas that have been identified as crucial in the development of future EPs in PNG, policy support mechanisms stands out the most because the formulation of a specific policy in favor of EPs would be the foundation for the development of EPs in the country.