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**MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS:  
INNOVATIVE RESPONSES FOR THE EDUCATION SECTOR**

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## **MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS: INNOVATIVE RESPONSES FOR THE EDUCATION SECTOR**

### **1. The global economic crisis**

The global economic crisis that hit the world in late 2008 came on the heels of sharp increases in food and fuel, from which many Pacific Island Countries were reeling. Weak economic growth along with the ever present threats of climate change plus a myriad of natural disasters, the challenges to Pacific leaders and decision-makers are daunting, in particular how to sustain services with potentially reduced budgets.

This paper explores how education in the Pacific could address challenges caused by the global economic crisis. After a brief overview of the context, it looks at global and regional literature to explore best practices and trends. It looks at how Pacific Island Countries are faring in this and other crises and proposes policy solutions for countries to consider. Finally, it proposes measures that regional and international development partners could consider to support the countries of the region.

### **2. Education in the Pacific**

While social, historical, demographic, geographic and economic contexts vary across the Pacific Island region, there are also commonalities in the challenges that each country faces in education. A review conducted in 2008 for the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) found that while considerable progress has been made in regard to access to education, all countries still face some issues in this area<sup>1</sup>. Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu still face challenges at the level of primary education with substantial numbers of children not enrolled in school or not completing the primary level. Other countries have achieved close to universal primary education but have access issues at secondary level, particularly for children in remote areas. The same review noted that all countries have access challenges with the provision of early childhood education as well as education for children with disabilities. There are also very limited non-formal and vocational education opportunities for out-of-school youth.

While progress on access is generally encouraging<sup>2</sup>, all countries face serious challenges with the quality of education. There are currently no agreed measures or proxy indicators of quality<sup>3</sup> but each country prioritizes quality issues in their strategic plans. While there is no statistical evidence, anecdotal views of professionals working in this area indicate stagnating or declining quality. Other areas of commonality in Pacific education include the frequently poor state of physical facilities; curricula that needs updating and revising; equity; and issues surrounding teacher competence.

For the purpose of this paper, a key issue is the financing of education, which is a concern that all Pacific Island Countries (PIC) share. In most PICs, education takes the largest share of both the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as well as of the national budget. Most PICs allocate around 20 per cent of annual budgets to education, which shows great commitment.

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<sup>1</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Report on the Review of the Forum Basic Education Action Plan and Associated Regional Processes, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Key education indicators are at Annex 1

<sup>3</sup> A significant weakness is that the Millenium Development Goals 2 and 3 do not address quality.

The 2008 PIFS review found that:

One of the major challenges facing every country is the issue of securing sustainable resources to underpin quality and expansion of the education sector. Education is a major component of each nation's economy, and finance and provision is sourced primarily from the public sector. The ability of systems to diversify their sources of finance for education is also critically dependent in the long term on achieving sustained increases in the rate of economic growth.<sup>4</sup>

The bulk of the recurrent education budget in PICs – around 90 per cent - is used for salaries. This leaves little for capital expenditure or education resources and relatively little room to manoeuvre when addressing a financial crisis. In some cases, however, there are adequate funds but there is a lack of absorptive capacity in Ministries of Education. Small Island States in particular often lack sufficient well qualified and experienced staff with the requisite skills.

PICs vary in the degree of donor support received for their education sectors, but all receive some assistance. Much donor support to education is for development activities or projects although an increasing number of countries have adopted Sector Wide Approaches (SWAp). The cost of aid is the requirement of substantial resource commitment from the recipient country, as well as the overload of extra work on staff. Donor aid is most cost-effective when it is provided and received under a strategic sector development plan. The plan must provide focus and include capacity strengthening to receive and coordinate national and donor funding.

Non-governmental organisations (NGO), church and community sector support for education is very significant in most PICs and parents and communities are expected to share the costs of educating their children. In Fiji, for example, almost all schools are owned and managed by community or religious organisations. Government provides teachers, a standardized curriculum, professional services and a grant to all schools and works in partnership with school management. In all PICs, NGOs and communities are prominent in the provision of early childhood education and non-formal and vocational education. There is a risk that in times of financial crisis, governments will place a greater burden on communities and the NGO sector, which are also suffering from the impact of the crisis.

### **3. The impact of the global economic crisis on education: a literature review**

Various agencies have conducted research into the impact of the global economic crisis on education. While most of the reports reviewed here are written with a global perspective rather than a regional one, there are lessons that can be learned. This section provides a brief overview of this research followed by an assessment of its relevance to the Pacific.

A strong theme of all research on the topic is that the crisis will hit poor households the most and that governments must target their most needy. A further message is that countries and development partners cannot let previous achievements be undermined: they must be sustained and built upon so that people are well equipped when the crisis is over.

The World Bank (WB) has produced several assessments on how a crisis in education can be averted in the current economic climate with a focus on what governments can do to safeguard previous gains in education, while recognizing that the ability of households to invest in education is also affected. Significant achievements of the past are at risk and every effort should be made to keep children in school. It advocates the adoption of social safety

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<sup>4</sup> PIFS, 2008, op cit, p6

nets that are often cut in times of crisis. These can provide immediate relief and can safeguard education, health and nutrition.

There is a strong case for formal social protection, especially as traditional social protection systems decline. Social protection is broadly defined as a set of policy initiatives that transfer income or assets to the poor, protecting vulnerable people against livelihood shocks, and seeking to enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized, an essential element of pro-poor growth.<sup>5</sup> A recent UN report noted that:

Social protection must be a priority consideration in this current crisis; the more severe the downturn, the greater the consideration. It is crucial to note that social protection policies have emerged as core elements of long-term poverty reduction strategies, rather than ad hoc crisis-driven strategies<sup>6</sup>.

There are abundant examples of countries where social protection measures have lessened the impacts of crises in different parts of the world, for example school lunch programmes have lessened school dropout rates compared to areas with no such programmes<sup>7</sup>.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has developed a Social Protection Index (SPI) and recently assessed eight PICs to determine their SPI. The ADB classified Cook Islands in the 'above average' category; Nauru, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu as 'average'; and Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea as 'below average' in terms of social protection programmes, using various indicators.<sup>8</sup>

Child protection is a more specific aspect of social protection. A recent costing analysis of child protection in Vanuatu reached a firm conclusion that systems put in place to protect and prevent children from abuse, neglect and harm yield significant cost savings, as it would save money in areas such as medical and policing costs. It would also have positive benefits in terms of reducing lost human capacity as children may be able to remain in school longer, thus potentially being able to contribute to the economic growth of the country rather than being a burden on it. The study found that the total annualized cost of child abuse in Vanuatu is estimated at between 293.8 and 425 million Vatu, which is between 0.5% and 6.8% of GDP.<sup>9</sup>

Experience from past crises on appropriate policy responses show that effort and investments need to be prioritized. It notes that focussing only on government social spending does not protect the poor sufficiently. Accurate targeting is required before benefits and / or subsidies can be provided as part of a social safety net. The most vulnerable children need to be identified and targeted. If current EMIS<sup>10</sup> cannot do this, it should be made to do so and this data needs to be fed back to policy makers. Various development and multi-lateral organisations advocate the use of conditional cash transfers, school feeding programmes and student scholarships as well as block grants to schools, paying teacher salaries and providing incentives to teachers<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> UNDP and UNICEF, Protecting Pacific Island Children and Women During Economic and Food Crises, 2009, p x

<sup>6</sup> UNDP and UNICEF, op cit, p x

<sup>7</sup> UNDP and UNICEF, op cit, p 49

<sup>8</sup> UNDP and UNICEF, op cit, p54

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, Child Protection Costing Analysis in Vanuatu (Draft report), 2009

<sup>10</sup> Education Management Information System

<sup>11</sup> The World Bank, Averting a Human Crisis during the Global Downturn: Policy Options from the

Likely effects of budget cuts are stalling construction, reducing repair and maintenance budgets and reducing administration costs. The WB notes that the crisis could be seen as providing an opportunity for education sector reforms that would increase efficiency by, for example, ensuring that resources do reach schools; increasing the accountability of schools; and increasing teacher performance. Countries need to be able to effectively monitor changes in key indicators such as enrolments, dropout numbers and absenteeism.

A more recent WB study on global challenges in basic education<sup>12</sup> echoed the need to focus on the poor and the most vulnerable, in particular those children who never attend school as those children and families will suffer the most in times of hardship. This is borne out by research in Indonesia during the economic crisis of the 1990s where gaps in school attendance were income related. Tentative conclusions of recent research conducted in the Pacific by UNICEF and other partners also verify this finding. Recent media reports in Fiji have highlighted hardships faced by poor families who face the risk of withdrawing their children from school due to inability to pay fees, provide uniforms and other necessities and to pay for transport.

It is recommended that countries and donors need to focus on cost-effective interventions especially in at risk areas. Recommended measures include lowering the cost of school attendance and school fees; conditional cash transfers; scholarships; free uniforms and meals; provision of water, sanitation and fencing; and salary incentives for teachers.

This WB study also takes the view that success should be measured not in terms of inputs but in learning outcomes and achievements in order to improve quality. Increasing the quality of education will make it more attractive for children to attend and for parents to value their attendance. Evidence also suggests that countries will be better prepared to weather the crisis and the recovery with an educated population.

The key messages from the literature reviewed are:

- Countries cannot just keep going with 'business as usual';
- Access to education must be maintained, especially for most vulnerable groups;
- Focus should be on improving quality and measuring outcomes rather than inputs;
- Move towards social protection such as provision of school meals; conditional cash transfers, scholarships, and incentives for teachers; and
- Governments need to prioritize and target interventions to improve efficiency.

#### **4. The Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Pacific Education**

Adapting to financial crises is not new to many PICs. In 1996, the Cook Islands undertook a massive restructuring of its civil service due to financial pressures. Nauru has had to make huge adjustments to the way it runs its government following the collapse of its phosphate industry after decades of prosperity. Solomon Islands had to rebuild after its civil conflict in the early years of this century. Fiji has been affected by successive military coups and crises since 1987. The three 'Compact' countries, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), are facing a gradual reduction in US funding and the challenge of sustaining services with a reduced budget. RMI declared a state of emergency in

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<sup>12</sup> The World Bank, The Global Challenge in Basic Education: Why Continued Investment in Basic Education is Important, Washington DC, 2009

2008 due to the fuel and associated food crisis, requiring urgent government intervention. The Governments of Tonga and Samoa have both undergone civil service restructuring in recent years. The small island states of Tuvalu, Kiribati and Niue have very narrow economic bases so financial planning is always constrained. Tuvalu and Kiribati have substantial trust funds that may have suffered setbacks in the financial crisis. Vanuatu has the ongoing challenge of a dual language education system which is costly to sustain and subject to political pressures. For Papua New Guinea, with a large, young population scattered over diverse and difficult terrain, the provision of education will always be costly. All PICs have suffered from various natural disasters with the necessity of rebuilding.

Most education strategic plans in PICs reflect a growing awareness that financial management systems need to be improved. The Papua New Guinea plan (2005-2014), for example, notes the need to eliminate 'ghost teachers' from the payroll.<sup>13</sup>

The allocation of funds for different sectors of education is significant. Although PICs tend to spend more funds at primary than secondary level, the unit cost at primary level is much lower than at higher levels and many more children – often double or treble – access primary education compared to secondary. The unit costs of providing secondary education are higher than primary unit costs due to higher costs of teachers, textbooks and accommodation. Primary unit costs are higher in some places because schools are small and scattered. This is often reflected in low student-teacher ratios in the number of small schools outside the urban areas, mainly due to the dispersion of the population and separation due to geography. Some schools are separate due to reasons of cultural, religious or community pressure. Roads between schools, clustering infant and lower grade schools with senior 'mother' schools, the development of multi-grade teaching and appointing district level 'master' teachers can counter this. An analysis of actual unit costs of education undertaken in 2002 showed that costs for secondary education are markedly higher than for primary education.

**Table 1 : Unit Costs at Primary and Secondary Levels (in local currencies)<sup>14</sup>**

Country	Primary	Secondary	Ratio Sec: Primary	Country	Primary	Secondary	Ratio Sec: Primary
Fiji	690	1,213	1.8	Palau	2,358	1,766	0.7
Kiribati	262	579	2.2	PNG	524	1,212	2.3
RMI				Samoa	342	403	1.2
				Solomon			
Nauru				Islands	312	1,337	4.3
Niue	1,703	2660	1.6	Vanuatu	25,000	78,000	3.1

Sources: Derived from various national budgets and MOE or DOE reports or responses.

Kiribati: The figures refer to 1997 and were calculated for the Government of Kiribati and WB Education Sector Finance Study. The figure for secondary is a weighted average of JSS unit costs for non-government (\$420), government secondary (\$2,034), and government upper primary (\$295). Data received from Nauru and Tonga are unverified.

The figures for PNG are derived from estimations of 2002 financial allocations and 2000 enrolments. The ratio of secondary to primary is probably higher than 2.3 as the financial information didn't allow adjustments for differences between elementary/primary and secondary salaries and possible variations in student teacher ratios.

<sup>4</sup>Figures refer to 1999 and secondary to junior secondary only (unit cost for national secondary schools is estimated as \$1,989. ) The estimates were made for the AusAID Education Sector Review and Identification Study, 1999.

Vanuatu figures refer to estimates for 1999. Unit cost for senior secondary is 110,000 vatu. Republic of Vanuatu. Education Master Plan. 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Papua New Guinea Department of Education, Achieving a Better Future: A National Plan for Education 2005-2014, p25

<sup>14</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Basic Education Finance in Pacific Forum Island Countries, paper prepared for the 2002 Forum Education Ministers Meeting

Not only is secondary education significantly more costly, but it benefits fewer children as statistics from Kiribati in Table 2 clearly show. This is typical of PIC budget allocation.

**Table 2: Kiribati: Expenditure by Education Sector as a Percent of the Total MOE budget and enrolments by sector**

	Primary		Junior Secondary		Secondary	
	% of budget	Total roll	% of budget	Total roll	% of budget	Total roll
2005	36.56%	16133	21.29%	7021	28.16%	4501
2006	36.74%	16087	21.54%	7138	28.27%	4284
2007	35.65%	15764	25.91%	7096	28.55%	4439

Source: Republic of Kiribati, Ministry of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2008

This table shows that while a consistently higher proportion of the education budget is spent on primary education, this benefits many more children than the higher levels, thus on a per capita basis, it is much less. While investing in primary education is crucial to establish a firm foundation in literacy and numeracy, it is also recognized that investing in secondary education is important in order to develop an adequately skilled workforce and to ensure a sufficient supply of teachers for the future. Expenditure on tertiary education is typically much higher per capita than lower levels of education.

The level that consistently receives the least budgetary attention across the region is Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) with most PICs allocating less than 1% of government education expenditure or less than 0.1% of Gross National Product on it.<sup>15</sup> Although some improvements have been made such as the addition of a year of pre-primary in the definition of basic education, ECCE teachers are often untrained and are poorly paid and there is a lack of clear policy and curriculum in most PICs. Yet research clearly shows that investments in ECCE can have very positive long-term dividends, especially in promoting social equity and ending the poverty cycle<sup>16</sup>. A recent review of all the education sector strategic plans undertaken by PRIDE found that:

Early childhood education is an area of growing interest in the region but in many countries it is left largely to community and church organisations and is not regarded as the core work of Ministries of Education. This situation is changing as many plans referred to the need to address issues such as developing ECE curriculum and increasing access to this level of education.

Another very under-funded area is non-formal education that serves the needs of those out of the formal school system. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this issue, it is suffice to note that the burgeoning population of young people, many of whom have limited means of earning a livelihood, poses immediate and long-term challenges for many PICs.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in a UNESCO presentation on 'Providing Quality Basic Education for All', July 2008

<sup>16</sup> Priscilla Puamau and Frances Pene (Eds) Early Childhood Care and Education in the Pacific, Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific, 2008 – chapters in this book make many references to the benefits of ECCE.

Apart from government expenditure, families have to bear considerable costs in order to send their children to school. As poverty and hardship increase in the region<sup>17</sup>, marginalized groups such as those living in remote rural and outer island areas as well as people in urban squatter settlements can find the expense of schooling prohibitive.

A 1998 study in Fiji investigated why children drop out of school and found that the overwhelming reason was due to financial hardship<sup>18</sup>. This view was expressed by head teachers, parents and children. Families could not afford school fees and other fees or associated costs such as uniforms, transport, books and stationery and other costs such as sports equipment, lunches etc. Although somewhat dated, there is no reason to believe that the situation has changed and it shows that financial hardship existed before the current global economic crisis.

Recent research in Tuvalu<sup>19</sup> showed that in families where children were not attending school, the main reason given was that families could not afford the costs.<sup>20</sup> This was mainly due to reduced incomes as the household head had lost employment and there was a reduced income. (The second most important reason was that education was not important.) About two-thirds of the respondents received remittances but only 15% noted that these had decreased and roughly the same number noted that remittances had increased. Less than half of all the households surveyed had any savings and the majority faced financial difficulties.

A similar study in Tonga<sup>21</sup> of 56 vulnerable households showed that while all their 121 children were enrolled in school, it was becoming increasingly difficult to send them to school every day. Most of the children did in fact attend school every day, but the reasons for not sending them were due to not being able to afford the expense, or illness. 60 per cent of respondents said that they found it more difficult to meet school-related expenses compared to the previous year. The majority (94%) contributed their time to the school, but this had decreased due to lack of time. Remittances were part of the household income for 82% of respondents, with 61% noting a decrease. 64% of the households said that they had more financial difficulties compared to the previous year.

A commonality with these studies is the degree of vulnerability of the households. Very few had any savings and there was a heavy reliance on remittances. In times of hardship, such families are pushed into poverty. When their children fail to attend school regularly, they will not be able to rise out of their disadvantaged situation without help.

## **5. Possible policy solutions for PIC governments**

Evidence shows increasing vulnerability to poverty and hardship in the Pacific region. PICS cannot allow socio-economic groupings to crystallize to a point where there are intransigent 'under-classes' and elites. Apart from ascribed social status, there has been a reasonable degree of social mobility in PICs whereby education has provided a means to improving one's livelihood. Many of today's PIC leaders come from humble backgrounds and have

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<sup>17</sup> As documented in Asian Development Bank, *Hardship and Poverty in the Pacific*, 2004

<sup>18</sup> Save the Children Fiji, *Keeping Children in School*, 1998

<sup>19</sup> Commissioned by UNICEF and other development partners

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF and other partners (unpublished) GEC Analysis Tuvalu, 2009

<sup>21</sup> UNICEF and other partners, (unpublished) Preliminary Results from Sentinel Site Surveillance in Tonga, 2009

through educational achievement, have been able to take leadership roles in a range of areas.

As traditional safety nets weaken with increased urbanization and other factors, social protection measures can provide a cushion for families to enable school attendance. Moves towards social protection are taking place in some PICs. The Northern 'Compact' countries provide bus transport where appropriate and this may contribute to high enrolment rates. Solomon Islands abolished school fees in 2009 and Vanuatu has developed a Basic Education policy whereby children no longer pay fees as of the 2010 school year. The Government of Samoa has also started the Samoa School Fee Grant Scheme in 2010 where disadvantaged families will be provided assistance for basic education from the ages of 5 to 14. The Government of Fiji is providing free textbooks and free transport to needy children in 2010. Such measures are laudable and need to be increased and improved in a carefully targeted way, so that all children are able to attend school regardless of their family situation.

The financial crisis provides an opportunity for Ministries of Education to adopt more efficient and effective policies and practices, so that services can be sustained. It is acknowledged, however, that education is an intensely political issue, so solutions that may make good economic sense, can be controversial.

Basic or primary education is still the level that most children access yet proportionately less is spent on this level or per head compared to other level. Several countries are keen to establish their own universities and tertiary institutions, which are high cost and benefit relatively few. This may be a time to be cautious about expanding the tertiary sector and refocussing on qualitative improvements at the primary and secondary levels.

Addressing quality should be a priority for PICs. However without accurate diagnostic testing, especially at early grades, it is difficult to accurately assess where the gaps lie. Countries need to continuously monitor literacy and numeracy to identify specific areas needing attention. Several countries have noted the importance of this area of work and have requested assistance from development partners to develop regional benchmarks.

The lack of monitoring of teacher effectiveness is also a concern that needs attention by countries. Teachers play such a crucial role in the education process and many PICs have a shortage of qualified and competent teachers. A consortium of development partners is working to develop a tool for monitoring teacher effectiveness.

Although declining, student repetition of classes is still widespread in some PCs. This practice has little educational benefit and causes inefficiency in the system especially at the primary level. Repetition can be interpreted as a sign of the inability of a system to deal with the different needs of students. At senior secondary level most repetition is voluntary when students are sitting high stakes examinations.

EMIS needs to be robust and collecting information that indicate efficiencies in the system, for example:

- Promotion rate: proportion of children who successfully complete a grade and proceed to the next grade
- Repetition rate: proportion of children who repeat a grade
- Dropout rate: proportion of children who leave the system
- Transition rate: proportion of children progressing from the final year of one level to the first year of the next level (eg primary to secondary)

- Survival rate: proportion of the first year student population in a year who reach a future year

Indicators also need to be developed to reflect quality issues, for example:

- Student achievements (learning outcomes)
- Teachers (qualifications etc)
- Student: teacher ratio
- In-service training opportunities for teachers

Development partners have been working together to encourage PICs to adopt system wide approaches to monitoring and evaluation (M&E), of which EMIS is an integral part. While a number of PICs have indicated their interest, there are shortfalls of funding and of capacity to undertake the required tasks.

Many PICs can improve organizational aspects of their education systems by strengthening their Ministries of Education. Significant progress has been made in recent years in the area of strategic planning for education, thanks partly to the PRIDE project<sup>22</sup>. All PICs and all states of the Federated States of Micronesia now have functioning strategic plans. A recent analysis by PRIDE<sup>23</sup> showed that the plans are adhered to and have made a qualitative difference in the functioning of the Ministries which is starting to be reflected in improvements in the school system. PRIDE has been able to provide support to Ministries of Education in various ways and has been of particular benefit to Small Island States.

Ministries must not only be able to develop sound strategic plans but must have the capability to effectively implement them and also to communicate the plans to the wider community. Many Ministries lack staff in key positions and senior staff are often absent attending regional and international workshops and meetings.

#### **Summary of policy recommendations**

- Identify vulnerable groups and target for assistance;
- Adopt appropriate social protection measures to maintain school access and attendance;
- Take measures to improve the quality of education, for example by monitoring teaching and learning and teacher competency;
- Strengthen EMIS to monitor efficiency of school system;
- Ensure that Ministries of Education are fully staffed with competent professionals;
- Take full advantage of regional and international development partner assistance.

## **6. Options for development partners**

In 2001, Education Ministers of the Pacific Islands Forum member countries met and endorsed a regional framework for education called the Forum Basic Education Action Plan. The main vehicle for implementing this Plan is PRIDE: Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of (Basic) Education funded by the European Union and NZAID and implemented by the University of the South Pacific. PRIDE has PICs in many areas, particularly with strategic planning. Although in its twilight phase, PRIDE may still be able to offer support to PICs that

<sup>22</sup> PRIDE = Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of (Basic) Education, funded by the European Union and NZAID and implemented by the University of the South Pacific

<sup>23</sup> PRIDE, Review of National and State Education Strategic Plans (Draft), 2009

require it, especially in the area of strategic planning. PRIDE has shown that a regional intervention can be cost-effective in providing targeted support and technical assistance to PICs.

Since 2001, Education Ministers have met regularly to review progress on regional education initiatives. In 2009, following a comprehensive review, a revised regional education framework was endorsed to replace the Forum Basic Education Action Plan, entitled the Pacific Education Development Framework.

At the 2006 Forum Education Ministers Meeting (FEEdMM), Ministers agreed that development partners<sup>24</sup> should develop regional standards in literacy, numeracy and life-skills. This reflects a growing interest in assessing learning outcomes for young age-groups, in the interest of improving the efficiency of learning. A World Bank initiative, Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), also has the objective of assessing early literacy and Tonga and Vanuatu have shown interest in engaging with this process.

At the 2009 FEEdMM, Ministers endorsed the development of regional standards for teachers, to be followed by standards for school principals. This is based on the premise that teachers are major determinants of the quality of education and the use of such regional standards would assist in national efforts to monitor and improve the quality of their teachers.

Development partners stand ready to provide support for EMIS and Monitoring and Evaluation, the latter being a gap in many Ministries of Education. Good M&E will enable countries to develop evidence-based policies that directly address their challenges. At the 2008 FEEdMM:

Ministers noted the importance of Monitoring and Evaluation to education systems and the need to strengthen education information and evaluation activities and the need to find new ways of working together in a more collaborative and efficient manner between governments and development partners.<sup>25</sup>

UNICEF and other UN agencies can assist countries with establishing and strengthening social protection measures. These UN agencies have proposed a Social Protection Floor Initiative which would offer support to countries wishing to strengthen access to basic social services for vulnerable populations.

Development partners can be more proactive in working with countries to address the issue of improving the quality of education. Best practice models from other parts of the world could be evaluated and trialled in the Pacific in partnerships with countries. There have been cases of improvements in quality, for example through the former regional BELS project and through PRIDE sub-projects<sup>26</sup>, but they have not been replicated to sustainably improve the whole system in any country.

Development partners can assist PICs most effectively when they work with the priorities set out in national education strategic plans rather than using a project modality. Such an approach is in keeping with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the Accra Agenda for Action on Aid Effectiveness and the Cairns Compact.

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<sup>24</sup> UNESCO, SPBEA and UNICEF

<sup>25</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Outcomes of 2008 Forum Education Ministers Meeting

<sup>26</sup> Such as book-flood projects; literacy support; school libraries.

**Summary of possible areas of assistance from development partners:**

- Monitoring learning outcomes at various years and using results to inform policy and practice;
- Standards for teachers;
- Providing regional level assistance on M&E (including strengthening EMIS) and Strategic Planning;
- Developing social protection mechanisms;
- Addressing the quality of education;
- Supporting countries to implement their education strategic plans;
- Committing to working under the Paris, Accra and Cairns Compact principles.

**7. Conclusions**

Strong policy decisions can mitigate the impact of the financial crisis. Although gains may not be immediate, the returns of maintaining spending on education in a targeted and prioritized manner should result in long-term social and economic benefits. Emphasis needs to be on equity, so that the most disadvantaged can raise their levels of living, and quality, to ensure that learning outcomes improve.

Countries need to take bold measures to ensure that gains in education that have been made are not lost due to austerity imposed by the current global economic crisis. The crisis can be viewed as a stimulus to develop new more efficient ways of organizing education systems in the countries of the Pacific region so that the children of the region receive quality schooling.

## ANNEX 1

### KEY EDUCATION INDICATORS FOR PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

	Net enrolment rate	Completion rate	Girls: boys ratio in primary school	Girls: boys ratio in secondary school
Cook Islands	100.0	85.0	0.88	1.01
Federated States of Micronesia	100.0	66.9	0.96	0.99
Fiji	94.0	99.0	0.95	1.06
Kiribati	97.0	82.0	0.98	1.01
Nauru	60.3	92.0	0.94	1.06
Niue	100.0	100.0	1.06	0.87
Palau	93.0	80.0	0.92	1.05
Papua New Guinea	77.0	68.0	0.80	0.67
Republic of Marshall Islands	90.0	89.0	0.91	0.98
Samoa	90.0	84.0	0.93	1.06
Solomon Islands	94.0	79.0	0.89	0.77
Tonga	95.0	89.0	0.90	0.98
Tuvalu	100.0	100.0	0.88	0.86
Vanuatu	93.0	72.0	0.90	0.99

**Source:** PRIDE poster: statistics obtained from [www.spc.int/prism](http://www.spc.int/prism)

**Notes:** Completion rate refers to the proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach the last grade of primary school. Net enrolment rates refer to the enrolment of pupils of the correct age in a particular level of education as a per cent of the official population of that age. These figures are based on census data and Ministry of Education enrolment data. The ratio of girls to boys is the ratio of the number of enrolled girls to the number of enrolled boys.