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SESSION TWO

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

This paper was prepared by the UNESCO office for the Pacific. The purpose is to provide further information on Inclusive Education in support of Paper PIFS(06)FEDMN.04, Review of the Implementation of the Forum Basic Education Action Plan.

Promoting Inclusive Education to Achieve Quality Education for All Implementing the Forum Basic Education Action Plan

Brief Paper submitted to the 2006 Forum Education Ministers Meeting

Inclusive education seeks to address the learning needs of all children, with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization, exclusion and isolation. At the core of inclusive education is the fundamental right to education for all. The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Spain in 1994, and was reaffirmed at the World Education Forum, the challenge of getting all children into school has been put on the political agenda in many countries and is reflected in the Forum Basic Education Action Plan in the Pacific, as well as Pacific commitments to achieving Education for All. This has helped to focus attention on a much broader range of children who are not in school or may be marginalized within the education system.

The overall goal of inclusive education is to promote opportunities for all children to participate and be treated equally. Inclusive education is defined as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners and of reducing exclusion to and within education system. Inclusive education is concerned within providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in both formal and non-formal educational settings. It advocates for changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, policies and strategies. At the heart of inclusive education is the vision to transform the education system so it can provide improved quality education for all learners. Schools are inclusive when they are working towards full participation, community and equality through: respect for differences, respect for different learning styles, variations in methods, open and flexible curricula and welcoming each and every child. In other words, inclusive schools are learner-centered and child-friendly. To this end, there are innovative pilot projects being conducted in remote islands in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands through UNICEF's support.

An important prerequisite for inclusive education is to know how many and which children are out-of-school and why. But providing access to people is only the first stage in overcoming exclusion. There needs to be a shift in perspectives and values so that diversity is appreciated and teachers are given skills to provide all children, including those with different learning needs, quality education. Inclusive education is seen by many as a matter of providing education for children with disabilities in a regular school setting. Partners are promoting a much broader view of inclusive education, which encompasses all children who are excluded on grounds of gender, ability, ethnicity, linguistic or poverty related reasons. Getting all children into school is just the first step primary level education cycle. In many countries failure to increase retention rates and poor levels of achievement in low quality schooling environments continue to show that claims of improved access is insufficient as evidence of progress in the education system.

¹ Overcoming Exclusion through Inclusive Approaches in Education: A Challenge and a Vision. Conceptual paper, UNESCO, 2003.

In the Pacific region, the then Prime Minister of Vanuatu brought the issue to the attention of Leaders at the 2002 Forum, which was discussed fully at the 2003 Forum and various recommendations made including endorsing the Biwako Millenium Framework. Concretely, the 2002 Forum Education Ministers Meeting discussed education of children with disabilities and made several recommendations that were added to the Forum Basic Education Action Plan, following which the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat organized a first Pacific Regional Workshop on Disability (August 2005) where the importance of education for children with disabilities was emphasized, citing the fundamental human right. Also the Forum Secretariat has recently concluded negotiations with University of the South Pacific to start a Bachelor of Education degree programme in special education as part of the implementation of Forum Basic Education Action Plan.

Subsequently, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education in Samoa that is currently implementing a pilot project to promote inclusive approaches to basic education, A Pacific Regional Workshop on Inclusive Education was organized by UNESCO and its partners in order to share experiences of inclusive education practices in the region and develop recommendations on how to further promote inclusive education in the context of the Forum Basic Education Action Plan and Education for All. A total of 70 people took part in the workshop, ranging from university academics to representatives from national governments and regional organizations to teacher educators and practionners at the community level. There was unanimous recognition of the fact that there must be stronger advocacy to ensure access children with disabilities and those in socially, geographically and linguistically vulnerable and marginalized groups to quality education and do the utmost to help them achieve during the course of their participation in formal education system.

During the course of the workshop, a few critical issues were raised and discussed so as to promote inclusive education in the Pacific, one of which is evidence-based policy actions. As mentioned above, it is critical to know who, where and why are children not attending or dropping (or dropped) out of school. Only then national governments can provide access to education that responds to the needs of children and that promotes successful learning of children. Therefore, availability of quality disaggregated data is prerequisite. 'Disability Surveys in the Pacific' conducted from 2001 to 2005 by Inclusion International, NZAID and participating Pacific countries shows that the data collected identify the number of children with disability not attending school and the prevalence of disability categories enabling Ministries of Education to plan more appropriately for teacher distribution as well as upgrade teacher training. Some countries are developing innovative approaches to begin to include children with disability(ies) by waiving school fees, recruiting parents and others as volunteers and providing transport to school, among other initiatives.

Another issue raised and extensively discussed was participation of all to make inclusive education possible and an enriching process for education sector development. Samoa is currently implementing a 2-year pilot project to mainstream inclusive approaches to basic education by adapting and translating into Samoan language a inclusive education toolkit

called 'Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments.' Generic version developed after extensive consultations with Asian countries and with Pacific inputs consists of 6 booklets on the ways and means to promote inclusive education. Samoa's Ministry of Education conducted extensive consultations with the wider community and organized numerous training for teachers. In adapting the above mentioned toolkit, all agreed that it was necessary to focus much more on family and community participation. The Samoan version of the toolkit therefore has an extended part to reflect such focus.

Some of pertinent recommendations made at the Workshop are as follows²:

- Review legislation to enforce inclusive education practices
- Upgrade teacher training to ensure that teachers are prepared and skilled in dealing with a wide range of diverse learners
- Promote and collaborate with EFA national coordinators and key stakeholders to
 ensure that inclusive education is used as a measurement to achieving quality
 education for all
- Encourage public awareness at all levels of communities and work with all stakeholders to promote inclusive education
- Share information between countries to promote good practices, ideas, advocacy tactics
- Develop a process for monitoring, evaluating and reporting progress

Another issue relevant to inclusive education is ensuring that all children living in remote and rural areas/islands participate in and benefit from education equal to those in urban areas and main islands. Access to education for girls is also an issue in some Pacific Island Countries.

In conclusion, educational data in the Pacific show that many countries have achieved and are advancing towards universal primary education but that drop out and retention rates continue to be high. Available research studies and literature conclude that the most pressing issue that education systems in Pacific Island countries are facing is that of quality. According to the 2005 Global Monitoring Report with a theme 'The Quality Imperative,' education should allow children to reach their fullest potential in terms of cognitive, emotional and creative capacities. An inclusive approach to education is one that strives to promote quality in the classroom. In order to move towards quality in education, changes are required at all levels. The process of promoting inclusive education will enable Pacific Island countries to make practical changes so that children with diverse backgrounds and abilities can succeed in our classrooms and schools. These changes will not merely benefit children who may be singled out as those with special needs, but all children and their parents, all teachers and school administrators, and everyone from the community.

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² Pacific Workshop on Inclusive Education. Final Report. UNESCO. 2006.