New approaches to the support of education reform in the Pacific

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The Ministers for Education of the fifteen independent Pacific states meet regularly under the aegis of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS). One of their major achievements has been the development of the *Forum Basic Education Action Plan* (FBEAP), a short but important document setting out visions, goals and strategies for education in the Pacific. A second achievement has been the establishment of the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Basic Education (The PRIDE Project) and the negotiation of funding with the European Union (EU) under its 9th EDF Pacific Regional Indicative Programme. The EU has allocated €8 million to the Project over a five year period. It is managed by the University of the South Pacific (USP). NZAID also joined as a funding partner with an initial grant of NZ$5 million over three years. The PRIDE Project was officially launched by the Samoan Minister of Education in May 2004. Its overall objective is:

> To expand opportunities for children and youth to acquire the values, knowledge and skills that will enable them to actively participate in the social, spiritual, economic and cultural development of their communities and to contribute positively to creating sustainable futures (www.usp.ac.fj/pride).

In order to achieve its objective, the Project seeks to strengthen the capacity of each of the fifteen countries to deliver quality education to children and youth across all sectors except higher education [i.e., pre-school, primary, secondary and Technical & Vocational Education & Training (TVET)], and through formal and non-formal means.

In designing the PRIDE Project, and with the concurrence of the two donors, the Ministers adopted several new approaches to the support of education reform in the Pacific. In many ways the Project is unique in the region. It advocates a holistic, sector wide approach to the delivery of development assistance; it encourages consultative and participatory approaches to educational planning; and it seeks to maximise donor harmonisation.

This paper reviews the work of the Project since its inception two years ago, with a focus on delivery mechanisms, and reflects on the experiences of the PRIDE team as they work with Ministers to achieve their vision of a more coordinated approach. In particular it will evaluate the benefits and challenges of donor harmonisation, and of Sector Wide Approaches (SWAps) to education reform, drawing on the experiences of the PRIDE team during the past two years.

Achievements of the PRIDE Project

In reviewing the achievements of the PRIDE Project, several key features emerge. They highlight the benefits of some of the approaches taken by the Project to support the development of basic education.

1. Local ownership

The PRIDE Project was designed and approved by the fifteen Ministers of Education: the process started with them, not with the donors. It was very clear at their third PIFS-sponsored meeting in January 2004, and at their fourth in May 2005, that Ministers saw this as <u>their</u> Project, and were determined to guide and direct it according to their countries' needs and priorities. Discussions with individual Ministers have reinforced this view. The donors, in turn, have shown quite remarkable willingness to allow this to happen.

Staff of the PRIDE Project, and the National Project Coordinators (NPCs) in each country, have a clear sense of accountability to Ministers. The bi-annual meetings of the Project Steering Committee, attended by Heads of Education Ministries, as representatives of their Ministers, further reinforce this perception.

At this relatively early stage in the Project, any evaluation of the benefits of a sense of local ownership are subjective. The PRIDE team, however, believes that it has led to a strong acceptance of and commitment to the Project in most countries, and generally to quicker decision-making. Staff in turn have a clear sense of direction and are able to maintain the momentum of Project delivery. Overall the Project is ahead of the schedule set down in its Financing Agreement.

2. Conceptual foundations

The choice of the Project acronym clearly was deliberate, and reflected the wishes of the Ministers. Each country is encouraged thereby to build its education plans and curricula on a stronger foundation of local cultures, languages and epistemologies, thus enabling students to develop deep pride in their own values, traditions and wisdoms, and a clear sense of their own local cultural identity.

This has led, in turn, to a commitment by the PRIDE team to building strong conceptual foundations for the Project. Earlier projects brought outsiders to the Pacific with western 'recipes' for the reform of education. The PRIDE team is committed to helping countries develop their own theoretical foundations, doing so via the creative fusion of their own epistemologies, values and wisdoms with the most useful ideas and approaches of the global world beyond their shores. The notion of syncretising the best of the local with the best of the contemporary global is embedded at the heart of the Project.

This approach undoubtedly has resonated with educators in most countries, and is starting to contribute to a new sense of local ownership and control, both in the planning and in the delivery of education. A stronger conceptual foundation also contributes to a more coherent and holistic approach across a Ministry, thereby supporting a SWAp.

3. Strategic planning

A starting point for any SWAp is effective strategic planning. Ideally, to ensure a strong sense of local ownership, the strategic planning process should be based on wide consultation with all stakeholders and beneficiaries. In the education sector this includes parents, teachers, students, NGOs, private providers, employers and other civil society groups. A key outcome of the PRIDE Project is the development of strategic plans for education in each country, plans that blend the best global approaches with local values and ways of thinking.

A set of ten benchmarks, based largely on FBEAP, were developed by the PRIDE team as a tool to guide the strategic planning of education. The draft benchmarks, along with a set of associated principles and indicators, were prepared consultatively with representatives from all fifteen countries. They were then field tested in the development, implementation and evaluation of strategic plans in several countries, and subsequently revised, again using a consultative process. The benchmarks document has been formally ratified by the Ministers, and has become a key regional resource for the review and development of education plans.

The Project also is assisting countries to implement their strategic plans and to monitor and evaluate the outcomes. Capacity building activities are being provided for educators at national, sub-regional and regional levels. To further support these activities the Project is developing an on-line resource centre to encourage the sharing of experiences and best practice amongst countries.

Overall, the PRIDE Project encourages participatory approaches to educational planning, policy-making and curriculum development within each country. In most countries there has been a very positive response. There is a clear wish to avoid top-down models, and a strong commitment to bottom-up processes. In our view these are essential features of any SWAp. Acceptance of Ministry plans, policies and initiatives by clients and stakeholders should be ensured right from the start.

4. Mutual collaboration and support

A key aim of the Project is to help countries to help each other. Earlier projects brought consultants from outside the region, and therefore became donor-driven as they responded to donors' priorities and preferences. The PRIDE Project is sourcing most of its consultants from within the region, and already has built up an impressive data-base of qualified people from Pacific nations. It is also funding local educators to go on study and training visits to each other's countries, not to those on the rim and beyond.

Already we have had some significant success stories in developing support networks. The Fiji Ministry of Education, for example, is taking a lead role in assisting Nauru to develop and implement a new vocational curriculum in its secondary school, and a twinning partnership has been established between Nauru High School and a secondary school in Nadi, Fiji, that has an impressive record in the delivery of vocational education. Here in PNG, assistance is being given to Vanuatu in developing an Open and Distance Learning policy, with a small team arriving next week from Port Vila.

Translated from regional to national level, especially in the context of SWAps, the same approach can apply. Instead of relying on external consultants to coordinate and implement

the SWAp, every effort should be made to find local personnel, or to recruit nationals who are living and working overseas, or who are returning from assignments with regional or international organisations. Failing this, it may be possible to recruit from other Pacific countries. Networks of mutual support within and between Ministries also can be encouraged, as well as stronger collaborative networks with NGOs, churches, universities and professional associations. The aim is to reduce aid dependence and draw on local resources to the maximum extent possible.

Challenges faced by the PRIDE Project

The implementation of the Project has not been without its challenges and disappointments. It is important that we analyse these, learn from them, and move on. There are significant lessons here for the implementation of SWAps.

1. Donor harmonisation

An effective SWAp requires effective donor harmonisation. It only takes one agency to pull in a different direction, or one individual in a key leadership role within the agency to do so, and the entire SWAp is threatened. The PRIDE Project is working with some Pacific nations where lack of harmonisation is posing a significant challenge. In the past in these countries, each donor agency had its own separate project in the education sector. At times there were overlaps and duplication, and at other times gaps, with no agency responding to urgent needs.

For example, in one country the Ministry of Education coordinated all donor input. With few experienced senior staff, and regular staff turnover, this became a difficult and time-consuming task. To help resolve this the Minister organised a donor meeting that led to a commitment by all agencies to a SWAp, with agreement to support a single project to which they would all contribute.

Six months later there was little if any progress. The process was stalled by one agency wanting to take a different approach to the others. This agency had allocated significant funding to the Ministry. Strategically, at a national level, it was important that the funds be accepted. But to do so would continue to slow down implementation of the SWAp. Other agencies offered to do the work, but that created difficulties for the Minister at cabinet level. The other agencies were tempted to close ranks and get on with the SWAp, but that would have made it awkward for the Ministry, and was not an acceptable solution. There is still an impasse. Negotiations with the 'out-of-step' agency have not yet been productive.

In situations like this a SWAp can become a very fragile process, and even become counterproductive. At best, it can significantly slow down the implementation of the reform process. It is a risk that needs to be weighed up by a Ministry and its donor partners before committing to a SWAp.

Another challenge that needs to be discussed and resolved at an early stage is that of donor agencies that prefer to stand alone. Several countries in the Pacific, for example, have chosen a strategic partnership with the Republic of China (RoC Taiwan), and are receiving substantial funding from this source. In fact, in some countries, RoC is probably the single largest donor. In the education sector in the Pacific, however, RoC personnel have not yet

participated in any donor consultative meetings or national planning workshops. This also seems the case for the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), except for Fiji where representatives have recently started attending the bi-annual donor meetings organised by the Ministry of Education. In cases like this, the onus comes back to Ministry personnel to try and weave support from such sources into the SWAp, alongside the input of other donors.

2. The role of external consultants

Most SWAps involve donor funding, and the provision of support by external consultants who are recruited and funded by donors. In some cases donors provide a senior person to be the coordinator/facilitator/leader of the entire process. Again, the PRIDE Project has been working with one country that has a multi-donor funded SWAp for its education sector. With donor assistance two external consultants were brought in, one as coordinator. The project very quickly developed a life of its own. And as is the way of such things, the coordinator, without too much delay, began running the project and making many of the decisions. He was efficient and capable, and everything moved along quickly.

However SWAps, by their very nature, can cover all areas of operation of the Ministry. And before too long the coordinator had taken over most of the work of the Permanent Secretary (PS). There seemed to be two groups running the Ministry side-by-side: the PS and his staff, and the project coordinator and his staff. Notwithstanding regular project coordination meetings, the PS kept finding things happening that he knew little if anything about. Once people in the Ministry, and the PS himself, woke up to what was going on, steps were taken to redefine relationships and establish decision-making protocols.

Stories like this are not uncommon. They emphasise how easy it is for a Ministry to lose control, and for decision-making to be taken over by external consultants operating to tight donor-imposed funding schedules. It is a risk that needs to be recognised by Ministries before a SWAp begins. It also requires very strong leadership from the PS and her/his senior staff. Clear lines of responsibility and reporting are absolutely essential, and need to be fully understood and accepted by donors and Ministry personnel alike.

3. Political realities

Another significant threat to SWAps is the constantly changing political landscape in many Pacific countries. I refer not only to changes in government, or in government policies, but to the constantly shifting political loyalties within and between parties, and to changes of Minister. This can result in different donor agencies coming in and out of favour, to sudden and substantial shifts in educational policy, and to conflicts and misunderstandings between Ministers and senior Ministry personnel that can lead to inertia and lack of real progress.

Staff of the PRIDE Project have experienced all of the above in various countries during the past two years. It is a genuine risk. And it affects donors and Ministries alike. The challenge is to design a SWAp that is sufficiently robust to withstand political uncertainties, but this is easier said than done. When a hiatus does occur, one solution is to seek assistance from a wise and highly respected individual such as a former political leader, or church leader, as a mediator and/or facilitator. A second, and perhaps more common response, is for everyone simply to bide their time and await the next round of political change. Whatever is done, or

not done, there can be long and frustrating delays in implementing a SWAp, delays that may not have had the same impact had there been a series of smaller, more discrete projects funded separately by donors.

4. Aid dependence

Over half of the total funding of the PRIDE Project is available to participating countries for national sub-projects that assist them to implement key priorities of their strategic plans. These sub-projects are the responsibility of the Ministries of Education. They are not undertaken by the PRIDE Project. Our role is simply to review, approve and fund sub-projects, and to monitor and evaluate.

Unfortunately, most countries have been very slow to submit sub-project proposals, and several of those that were approved had not begun some months later. This is not for lack of support and encouragement from the PRIDE team. Rather, it appears to be the result of deep-seated aid dependence in at least some of the fifteen countries. They appear to be waiting for the PRIDE Project to come and implement sub-projects for them. There is a long history of outsiders managing projects in the Pacific. Reliance on them has led to inertia amongst some local staff, or to lack of initiative, or to lack of confidence to take on the work themselves. One of the unforeseen challenges for the PRIDE team therefore is to help countries initiate and manage their own sub-projects.

Aid dependence can be a serious risk to any SWAp. Countries can fall into the trap of allowing decision-making and implementation to be taken over by outside consultants. Donors can fall into the trap of assuming control in order to speed up project delivery and meet their funding deadlines. This risk needs to be seriously considered by all parties prior to project start-up, and clear strategies put in place to minimise it. As we are experiencing in the PRIDE Project, it is much more difficult to deal with it once it happens.

Summary

This paper reviews the PRIDE Project, a regional, multi-donor initiative in the education sector, and evaluates some of the benefits and challenges of a more coordinated, sector wide approach. It emphasises the benefits of local ownership, the development of strong conceptual foundations and effective strategic plans, and the value of collaborative networks and use of local resources. It also discusses the risks that PRIDE staff have observed in SWAp implementation, including the difficulties faced when one agency pulls in a different direction, or when a Ministry loses control, with decision-making taken over by external consultants. Other significant threats to SWAps can be the constantly changing political landscape, and long-standing patterns of aid dependence. These risk needs to be recognised by all parties prior to project start-up, and clear strategies put in place to minimise them.