

## **Equitable Education: PNG's Challenge in closing the Gap.**

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### **1. Abstract**

The objectives of the Department of Education place much emphasis on providing basic relevant education in order to make a contribution to society today. The National Department of Education (NDOE) is focused on developing an education system to meet the needs of Papua New Guineans and its people. Most importantly, the system provides appropriately for children, upon leaving school, to be able to fit into the village community, engage in formal employment, or continue to further education and training.

The objectives conjure up several issues on the education system, which relate to the provision of equitable education for "all" Papua New Guineans. These issues relate to policy and policy implementation strategies that have not been fully addressed. This presentation attempts to offer a critical perspective on the challenges of the education system in its implementation and practice of equitable education, over mere rhetoric. It will attempt to highlight the progress made as well as deficiencies in the system's endeavour to provide equitable education.

### **2. Introduction**

Equity seems to be the popular topic around at this time, especially when the Kina is involved in a project. The National Department of Education has been involved in a lot of projects, with a lot of money, and a lot of attention to the subject of equity. This paper contributes to the discourse on a subject matter that touches very much the social life of Papua New Guineans. The main focus of this paper is on equity in education.

The education reform targets the generality of schools without specific provisions for urban, rural or remote locations. While the focus of this paper is on the issues on the inequitable delivery of educational services, it will highlight the gaps that relate to the delivery of educational services to primary school communities, especially to the rural and remote parts of the country. The paper will highlight some deficiencies obtained from observations made in three districts and make suggestions for the way forward to achieve tangible results that are equitable throughout PNG

### **3. Context**

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has more than 1,400 islands spread over a sea area of 1,900,000 square kilometres, and a land area of 462,840 square kilometres. The PNG mainland contains some of the most rugged terrains in the world, and covers about seventy-five percent of its total land mass. This, obviously, makes it difficult for government infrastructure and services to reach the country's entire population. By 1986

PNG had a total of 18,366 kilometres of road of which only six percent was sealed, mostly in national roads (Rannells, 1990, p.150).

According to figures obtained from the 2000 population census, the country's population was 5,190,786, comprising 52 percent male and 48 percent female. The PNG annual growth rate is 2.7 percent (Gomez, 2003).

The education system in PNG is currently undergoing structural and curriculum change as a result of the 1990–1991 Education Sector Review. The reform education system is characterised by the two primary components of structural development and curriculum development.

It was envisaged that the nine years of basic education before four years of secondary education would help to overcome some of the problems related to access, enrolment, retention, and gender balance, particularly when the imbalance is against girls. The restructure of the system has helped to improve the primary school curriculum and the development of the elementary curriculum in terms of their quality, relevance and contextual support. Unlike the previous system, primary school pupils now graduate at grade eight feeling more capable and confident to contribute to their own lives and to the life of the community.

#### **4. What we are building on?**

##### **4.1 Equity in Education Policy and Planning**

The PNG Constitution provides us with the most appropriate place of support for beginning this discussion on equitable education through the equitable delivery of education services to all Papua New Guineans. The preamble of our National Constitution states very precisely and clearly the five National Goals and Directive Principles, which together embody the purpose of the PNG people's existence. Two of the five goals of the National Constitution, which are most applicable to the education sector, are: the goals of 'integral human development' and 'equality in participation'. The National Constitution declares 'integral human development' to be its first goal. It holistically incorporates the other four goals in these words:

'every person [is] to be dynamically involved in the process of freeing himself or herself from every form of domination or oppression so that each man or woman will have the opportunity to develop as a whole person in relationship with others' (Kwa, 2001, p.15).

Another important source of support is the 'Philosophy of Education'. The philosophy of education is really a document of equity. When reflected upon from an equity perspective, it encompasses the objectives of 'integral human development' through 'integrating and maximizing: socialization, participation, liberation, and equality' (Matane 1986, p.6).

The Government is committed to its role in achieving the goals of integral human development and equality in participation. However, equitability must be sought first in order that equality in participation, equality in access to educational services, and equality in other opportunities can become tangible. The efforts made by the Government to address the issue of equity and equality have mirrored the trend in the international community to find appropriate and workable solutions. Among a number of international convention resolutions to which the Government has given its support and endorsement are: the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1962), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Education for All (United Nations Declaration 1990), and the Beijing Declaration (1995). The Government has taken steps to attend to the resolutions. The Papua New Guinea Platform for Action, The National Education Plan 1995-2004, Education for All, and The National Education Plan 2005-2015, are examples of this.

In addition, the Government's positive response has been strengthened through the development of a number of policy documents, now available in the education department and to the public. These are the National Special Education Plan and Policy and Guidelines for Special Education (1994), Papua New Guinea National Education Plan A & B (1996), Gender Equity in Education Policy: Guidelines for Implementation (n.d.), and the most recent National Education Plan 2005-2015 (2004). Strategies planned for the implementation of the policies may be contained with the policy documents for equity and equality in education or are included in the general education reform implementation plan. The Education for All: Papua New Guinea National Plan, 2004-2015 c. (2004) is the most recent document that gives considerable recognition and attention to the inseparable equity and equality issues.

There have been related studies carried out to inform the policies on equity and equality of opportunities, and the reform education policies that are now in use. Some examples of these are the Education Statistics of Papua New Guinea (1997), and Children, Women and Families in Papua New Guinea: A Situation Analysis (1996). Other major researches (Gibson 1990, 1993; Flaherty, 1998) on this topic have also contributed to informing a wider knowledge on the subject.

#### **4.2 Current Interventions**

The effort made, so far, by the NDoE in collaboration with donor countries is evident in many educational projects that have been undertaken in different parts of the country. Some programs have particularly targeted rural and remote parts of PNG. For example, the European Union's (EU) Improvement of Rural Primary Education Facilities (IRPEF) project is involved in infrastructure and professional development of education personnel in the districts of Saidor, Jimi, Dreikir and Ambunti. Its goal is to improve the performance of students, especially girls, through increasing access and participation, and raising the quality of their education.

A similar AusAID project, the Education Capacity Building Program (ECBP) is currently in operation and should contribute to reducing the imbalance in the delivery of education

services. Nevertheless, it is evident that the implementation of education reform has been erratic and unequally distributed in the rural and remote communities of the country.

## **5. Gaps and Implications on equitable education**

Reform policies now form the basis for educational operations at the provincial, local, and the community levels. Implementation of these policies is shared between the national government and the guidelines contained in appropriate legal documents. The NDoE is aware of the difficulties experienced in the implementation of the reform system, but it is yet to have accurate knowledge and deep understanding of the real problems and challenges that the implementers in the communities experience on a day-to-day basis while they provide for the education of learners in the rural and remote communities.

The sections that follow attempt to highlight some of the realities in the problems and difficulties faced by the rural and remotes communities. The NDoE is responsible for the strategies that would narrow an equity gap between the advantaged town communities and the disadvantaged rural and remote communities.

### **5.1 Equity in access**

It is appropriate at this stage to define 'educational equity' in order to clarify the meaning and perspective on which the discussion in this paper is based. Borrowing from the Queen's University - Senate Educational Equity Committee,

'equity in education is achieved when all members of our society have fair and equal opportunity to participate in and enjoy the benefits of an education, including the opportunity to experience success and human dignity while developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to contribute as leaders and citizens in their society.'

<http://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/seec/policy/pg3.shtml>

An important clarification is made on the concept of equity, that

'[it] goes beyond formal equality where everyone is treated the same, to fostering a barrier-free environment where individuals benefit equally. It recognises that some people or groups of people may require additional and/or unique approaches in order to achieve equal benefit' (ibid.).

Equitable education, therefore, challenges PNG to reach a level when all Papua New Guineans, including those in the remote communities have fair, just and equal opportunity to participate in and benefit fully from the education services provided.

In some of the NDoE documents the term 'equity in access' is used to refer to equal opportunities provided for school age children to enter formal education in elementary prep or grade one (in as it was in the old system), grade 9 and grade 11 levels. Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Education for All (EFA) have the goal of reaching such an

objective that gives equal opportunity for all PNG children to have a basic education regardless of socio-economic level.

This paper expands on the meaning of *equity in access* to refer to the wider perspective of the conditions in the rural communities that allows or disallows them to gain their right of way into schools that function well and provide equally high quality education. Equity in access is restricted by forces within and external to these school communities. This paper focuses on the external factors inhibiting access.

Recent field trips to rural and remote schools in three districts revealed that long walking distances to schools, muddy paths, and very poor transport infrastructure contribute a great deal to the low morale and interest level, and poor performance of a majority of primary school students. It was consistent in the three districts, that some students develop unacceptable ways of coping with the situation. A common phenomenon of the female students is to stay home when they are late to go to school. The life of the female student is tough, especially when they are expected to share the workload with the parents. Some boys and girls would often miss the second and fourth days of school to have a rest from walking long distances.

Access to school for all school age children is very much dependent on having access to other opportunities as well. For the rural and remote school communities, equitable access to educational services are impeded by lack of access to government services, and the two most important are effective transport infrastructure and communication systems. In an isolated community of the Jimi district, seven LLG Council areas; with several wards each share one community school. To continue into grade 7, the students have to walk hours along bush tracks to the primary school. To continue in this way is unjust.

Unfortunately, for these communities, the absence of accurate statistics on pupils and teachers, together with continued lack of funds, make it impossible to redress education imbalances (NDOE, 2003). It is obviously an issue of equity in access needing to be corrected so all equally benefit. Unfortunately, the advantaged minority (15%) are way ahead of the rest in terms of educational opportunities and other benefits that are provided for the people of PNG. Government services must improve in the rural communities before equity in access becomes a reality.

### **5.2 Equity in educational services**

The rural communities are disadvantaged in terms of government services. There is evidence to show that this situation hinders the delivery of educational services. In the Ambunti district 50 percent of the registered schools are closed. Of the schools that are still operating, some are struggling with the great shortage of teachers, an equity issue to be discussed later. In the Jimi district three of the twenty-two schools are closed, six are fully staffed, five schools are staffed by only 16 percent of teachers, six other schools have fifty to sixty-seven percent of teachers at the school. There is a great shortage of teachers in the schools, which leads to decline in enrolments and then the schools do not get sufficient income from fees. Rural schools are financially disadvantaged. Schools in these rural communities operate on the goodwill of the communities and some

individuals including the headteachers. To have schools not functioning in the rural communities is an educational equity issue.

A policy area that has contributed a great deal to the financial plight of the rural and remote schools concerns the payment of school subsidies. To all the headteachers interviewed, this policy is most unfair to the financially disadvantaged rural schools. The subsidy received is not sufficient and unjustly distributed for the reasons that have been emphasised. The headteachers request that a fairer system should replace the present policy, which does not recognize the difficult financial conditions of the school communities and the environment around them. They need to be given more to be equal with schools around the country.

To improve equity in access, rural school communities require additional funds. The schools and rural communities will benefit more from increased funding. 'Money makes a difference in equitable education' (NWREL, 1996) and money means a lot to the economically disadvantaged rural communities. The fees and subsidies do not go far enough to meet most things the learners need for equitable education.

It was revealed that appointing authorities at the provincial level do not commit themselves to sorting out the problem of teacher-shortage at the district level. Essential services that should be provided to teachers in the districts are non-existent. Teachers and inspectors in the rural communities know that teachers' appointments for schools around the urban centres take precedence in the systems provincial education authorities use for appointing teachers. This leaves headteachers and their staff feeling disheartened and unhappy about their conditions of work.

The consequences of not having enough teachers or not getting good teachers to the rural schools are many. It is evident that teachers are overworked; their quality of teaching is undesirable; quality of learning is poor; therefore, quality of education is substandard; causing the community to feel unhappy and refuse to work with the teachers. Despite the policy for decentralizing administrative powers, the rural schools seemed to have been excluded to operate in isolation on their own. The quality of education received in the rural schools is certainly an equity issue.

A more recent problem of equity in educational service delivery to rural schools concerns the distribution of curriculum material. There is need to stress that there is evidence to show that the 2003-2004 distribution of curriculum materials did not reach all schools in the rural and remote communities. In some schools, there were reports of materials going missing and some were seen sold at the local market, a variation to selling in the stationery shops.

### **5.3 Gender equity in school communities**

The issues raised in this section concern equitable access in educational opportunities by both male and female children in the rural communities of PNG. There are also concerns about the school and community environments that have an influence on gender equity in education. Results obtained at the schools show that access by females and gender equity

are areas in need of much improvement. In all the schools concerned, there was a great imbalance in school enrolments, which tended to favour the male students. Study (GOPNG & UNICEF, 1996) highlights the reasons for this phenomenon. Data from the schools visited confirm the NDOE results.

While there is some effort taken at the school level to address these concerns, it is felt that two things need to happen to support what has already been done. First, leadership at the higher levels of the education authority have to take charge, and implement from their levels. It is evident that there is a leadership gap separating the district from the provincial management. This hinders the implementation of the gender policy. Second, there is overwhelming evidence of the need for awareness raising or education on matters relating to gender equity in education. This gender equity education has to include the school and the local community. It is apparent that the local community attitude in relation to gender equity has to take a leap in order that gender education is supported in the community. For this to happen, it requires the commitment and collaborative effort of the school leadership, the community leadership, and leadership at higher levels.

The action of community education, especially on the very culturally sensitive issue of gender equity is not going to be easy, and will take time. This education has to do more than talk about male and female stereotyping. Community education on gender equity has to break into cultural barriers to unlock certain mindsets that do not accept that women and girls are capable of taking on male roles and vice versa. Gender equity education will free people from some culturally repressive practices that impede development and progress, not only of the female members, but also of the weaker and minority groups in our society. Changing people's mindsets and attitudes that are culturally engraved will take a long time. The experiences of extending education to the community can become the catalyst for bringing the community and school to closer and better working relationships with each other.

## **6. Implications and where to go from here**

Attempt has been made to highlight a number of issues which relate to equitable education in rural school communities. The issues raised are significant for making changes in the administration of education in Papua New Guinea. For many years these issues have caused the gap between the rural school communities and the advantaged schools. These issues have to be addressed in order that all school children gain fair and equal opportunity to participate in and enjoy the benefits of an education.

The deductions made on the issues discussed offer the following suggestions by way of strategies for a different approach to facilitate equity in education in the future. The following suggestions are made:

- The Government must commit to equitable education for all in the rural communities by ensuring:
  - equal access to schools,
  - quality of education be equal to town schools,
  - equitable system of determining fees paid by children and parents,

- equitable distribution of educational services, physical and human resources;
- A change in the education policy to effect equity in education. The change will involve
  - a redefinition of 'urban', 'rural', and 'remote' as alluded to by Gibson (1990),
  - enrolment at secondary schools of more rural students who show potential and talent,
  - the distribution subsidy to reflect the harsh environment of the rural communities;
- Leadership at all levels of the education structure are effectively committed to the tasks in equitable education;
- Massive improvement in transport and communication infrastructure, and health services will contribute immensely to achieving equity in education for rural communities; and
- It is relevant to bring the parents and the community to active participation at the school, community education unlocks certain barriers that prevent working together.

## **7. Conclusion**

The picture presented on the issues in equitable education represents a small part of the vast rural communities in PNG. Many of the problems highlighted are familiar. Studies specific to this topic (Gibson, 1990, 1993) and (GoPNG & UNICEF, 1996) have raised a lot of the issues. Despite the many reports, the specific nature of the equity in education issues that relate to the rural communities are stirringly different from that, which we (sitting in here) know about. The education authorities and policy makers, as educational leaders, have to seriously construct practical solutions to make quality education equally accessible by all Papua New Guineans.

This paper has focused on the improvement of equitable access to quality education across socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, classes, gender and languages. Equity in the delivery of educational services, which involves having quality human resources and sufficient appropriate physical resources, remains a major impediment in the education of rural communities. It is widely acknowledged that improvements in transport and communication infrastructure will contribute immensely to equitable education. Gender equity education is essential for the school and the community to transcend the level of cultural stereotyping and accept that men and women, boys and girls are equal. Could this concept be the gap?

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A graduate of UPNG-Goroka Teachers College, taught in lower and upper secondary schools before moving into teacher education. Taught for 4 years in Primary Teachers Colleges before becoming registrar of Divine Word University. Left being registrar to do studies. Currently doing PhD studies through DWU.