

## **A Context-sensitive Approach to Educational Aid**

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*This paper argues that the approach to educational aid must be sensitive to underlying fundamental contextual considerations within the communities aided. In Pacific Islands countries, these relate to weak leadership and, consequently, a lack of clear national vision and plan for education. This paper discusses the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative, its context-sensitive approach and its areas of innovation, significance and challenge.*

### **Introduction**

Three or more decades of sustained educational aid to Pacific Island countries (PICs) have not resulted in sustainable quality education in these communities. According to Pene, Taufe'ulungaki and Benson (2002:2), this is "because [Pacific Islanders] do not own the process, educational visions and goals of education". Instead, these are defined by donors and other external players. Aid to education will continue to be an integral component of educational development for some of these countries, but ownership of the process, the visions and the goals is a matter of concern.

Historically, educational aid has been delivered through bilateral, multilateral and regional programmes, using various approaches. These approaches have in common the fact that they are donor-driven and donor-controlled. More recent forms, including co-financing, sectoral budgets and country trust funds, are being discussed or tried. More often than not, these approaches, though well intentioned, do not seem to be sensitive to local agendas, timelines and ways of working.

This article examines a new approach to educational aid, based on the experience of the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI), funded by the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZ Aid). The article is based on the experiences of Pacific educators, including the author, as these relate to the RPEI, between 2001 and 2003. The article draws heavily on the conversations of Pacific educators and their NZ Aid partners. As the facilitator of the RPEI, the author has also used information from reflections, evaluations and feedback by Pacific educators, including reports and papers written by those closely associated with the initiative.

## **Background**

Educational aid in PICs is big business. In 2000, the total aid to these countries was US\$657.5 million, with Australia being the largest donor (Davis 2002). Other key donors in the region are the European Union, the United States of America, New Zealand and Japan. The New Zealand development programme is small (by world standards) with a total annual budget of more than NZ\$226 million of which 47% is directed to PICs (NZ AID 2002). NZ AID's linkages with PICs are strong, with more than 40% of the Agency's bilateral program targeting education. A new project on basic education, the Pacific Regional Initiative for the Delivery of Basic Education (PRIDE), totaling around NZ\$21 million and financed by the European Union and New Zealand, has recently been implemented.

The distribution of aid appears to mirror the educational needs of countries, hence, the three most needy Melanesian countries of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu received more than 50% of total aid to the region in 2000 (Davis, 2002).

Historical and constitutional relationships with donors also influence the amount of aid given to certain countries. Educational needs have also been seen in terms of what is being financed. In the past few years, the shift of attention by donors has moved from tertiary to basic education. In general, however, educational aid is directed towards improving access, participation and quality; training teachers; developing curriculum; and developing the policies of local Ministries of Education.

Educational aid has resulted in some success, with schools built, teachers trained, curricula developed and books produced. In the Melanesian countries, many more girls have been able to attend school. More children have learnt to read and write in English. On the whole, however, the impacts of aid have been largely disappointing (Tahu and Fangalasu'u 1995; Baba 1999; Nabobo 2000). Aid has not resulted in quality and sustainable educational standards (Hughes 2003) or improved relationships among educational stakeholders (Sanga 2001). Nor has it fostered strong Pacific leadership in education (Sanga and Nally 2002). Instead, despite decades of aid, Pacific peoples still do not own their education systems (Taufe'ulungaki 2002) and have remained overwhelmed by their inability to meet basic educational needs or to provide services at consistent quality levels. This situation is a result of

the way aid is 'delivered', usually by external (often non-national) consultants and organisations, to Pacific Islanders who are expected to 'receive' it compliantly. The possibility that the aid involves personal relationships among groups of people has never been seriously explored. This basic approach has not changed over the last few decades. Its impact, however, has left Pacific educators overwhelmed, discouraged and angry.

### **Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI)**

As an idea, the RPEI was initiated and developed by a group of Pacific educators (Konai Thaman, 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki, Kabini Sanga) in late 2000. The idea was then shared with NZAID, which, following further discussions with these Pacific educators, agreed to support the initiative financially for a 5-year period. The focus of the initiative has been on enhancing leadership by Pacific educators for educational development within Pacific countries and strengthening local capacities within these communities. This is done through a number of strategies, including: (1) big picture strategising of education; (2) engagement with key stakeholders, including donors, governments and regional institutions; (3) facilitation of national and regional forums to rethink education; and (4) development of research skills and capacities within Pacific countries to produce appropriate educational research by Pacific Islanders.

The initiative began in Suva, in 2001, with a Pacific regional colloquium on re-thinking education. This was followed by a number of national pilot activities in Vanuatu (research workshops and a conference, 2002). In 2002, papers from the colloquium were edited and the resulting book, *Tree of Opportunity: Re-thinking Pacific Education*, was published by the University of the South Pacific's Institute of Education. The book is used widely as a reference and university text. In the same year, the Pacific Education Research Fund (PERF) was established. Early in 2003, the initiative facilitated a planning workshop for a national review of Solomon Islands' education strategic plan. A regional conference on educational aid was held in October 2003. In the same year, a number of national research projects were commissioned and undertaken by Pacific Island nationals. With funding from PERF, a number of small research projects have also begun and are currently under way in several countries.

It has been only a few years since the RPEI began, but even in its early stages, the initiative has generated considerable interest among Pacific educators. In an evaluation, Pacific educators reinforced the strategy and claimed that it had “ignited regional and national leadership and commitment to Pacific education” (Sanga, Niroa and Teweiariki 2003:4). Where people have had some significant involvement with its activities, they appear to have been encouraged and inspired, as educators within their own communities, to lead, be mentored and become mentees themselves.

### **The approach**

What is different about the approach used in this initiative? At a later stage, I shall discuss the answer to this question more fully. For now, let me briefly say what the approach does **not** involve. First, the RPEI was neither initially commissioned by NZAID nor driven by it once the donor had agreed to support it. Second, the RPEI is neither managed through a New Zealand management services contract, nor does it involve any New Zealand advisers or consultants. In fact, the initiative does not use consultants at all but engages Pacific educators to support and collaborate with their colleagues. Third, the initiative is not a project. It evolves, is organic and responsive to education in the PIC generally and within national contexts as understood and requested by Pacific educators within those contexts.

### **Key features**

In the following section, key features of the approach are discussed in greater detail.

#### ***1. Focus***

It has been stated above that leadership by Pacific peoples is a primary need in education in PICs. This one factor was deemed essential by Pacific educators, who want strong national education systems that reflect Pacific cultures, aspirations and needs. The way of working deemed appropriate for NZAID and its Pacific partners was one that enhanced greater leadership by Pacific educators. Sanga and Nally (2002) explained that referencing all aspects of the RPEI to strengthening of leadership by Pacific peoples provided

a powerful and cohesive touchstone for the initiative and mitigated the risk of activities or the donor approaches becoming the focus in themselves. By focusing on people, the initiative could then push for Pacific needs for leader-development. By design, NZAID was encouraged to take an arm's length strategy by "listening and questioning, for better understanding, and to evaluate what was being heard against its own understanding of Pacific education" (Sanga and Nally 2002: 4). For NZAID, this was risky but the Agency went down that road with its Pacific partners. So far, it has been a satisfying experience for those involved.

## **2. Strategic collaboration**

The need for real engagement, as opposed to one of compliance, has been a concern for Pacific peoples within aid relationships. The approach taken by the RPEI has allowed for "interactive, formative and collaborative dialogue" (Sanga and Nally 2002: 4) to take place at various levels of engagement between NZAID and Pacific educators and between key Pacific educators and their colleagues. Collaborative discussion began from the development of the initiative and is an ongoing feature of it. Key partners meet regularly to talk, listen, agree or disagree. The process has been challenging, as different partners often had different goals or different interpretations of these. Where difficulties have been encountered, particularly in relation to meeting NZAID regulatory requirements, the temptation has been for Pacific educators to disengage from the partnership. The partners have, however, stayed engaged with each other, thereby challenging the more usual modes of implementation and finding newer ways of working. The result has been, as noted by Sanga and Nally (2002:4), that the process of collaborative dialogue has "helped to build a relationship of understanding and trust beyond that which usually exists in contractual [approaches] for delivering aid".

At another level, the initiative has encouraged and experienced active engagement by a wide range of Pacific peoples at all levels of education. In Vanuatu, where pilot activities were held in 2002, community leaders, women's groups, members of the clergy, teachers, government officials, politicians, members of civil society, the media, consultants, academics, researchers and students participated in the research workshops and a national conference. These activities were decided on by the Ni-Vanuatu educators.

Leading Pacific educators questioned, listened and discussed the plans with Ni-Vanuatu, then discussed these further with NZAID for the purpose of funding.

The Ni-Vanuatu saw the approach used in working with them as empowering and appreciated it, as seen in the following feedback, recorded by Sanga, Niroa and Teweiariki (2003:28):

We valued the genuine attitude reflected by NZAID in giving Ni-Vanuatu the liberty to decide and plan activities that we saw as most appropriate for ourselves. As Ni-Vanuatu people, we never had to deal with an NZAID staff. This was unusual and new to us and therefore meant a lot for us. For NZAID to give Ni-Vanuatu people the financial means, then allow us to plot our path towards our own destination was probably the most useful service by NZAID to Ni-Vanuatu.

### ***3. Openness of support***

Pacific partners have often pointed out the restrictive nature of contractual approaches to aid and their wish for support that is more responsive to allow for opportunities to be fully utilised as these are created. NZAID supported the RPEI from its inception as a multi-year initiative. While the duration of RPEI is envisaged to be longer than five years, the decision by NZAID was welcomed, as five years is adequate to test the ideas and approach used. NZAID is also aware that, while it is the major donor for the RPEI, Pacific educators are free to seek other donor partners for any or all of its activities. In explaining this capacity, Sanga and Nally (2002) stated that the structure of the RPEI and the funding arrangements have allowed for leading Pacific educators to maintain the right to seek support from wherever they choose. Thus in 2002, the author explored and obtained funding support from the United Kingdom Department for International Development for research development workshops in Tonga, from UNESCO for the regional conference on educational aid, and from two New Zealand companies to support RPEI activities in Vanuatu and Fiji.

As stated above, the need was for a relationship of openness with donor partners. The RPEI approach was sensitive to that need, thereby supporting Pacific peoples in their desire to remain in control of their choices and relationships.

#### **4. Responsiveness**

The people who have the most stakes in and understand Pacific education fully are Pacific peoples and educators. Given the great distances between islands and the nature of traditional approaches to aid, Pacific peoples have not hitherto had the opportunity to inform the discussions and debates on education in their own countries. They have not been mobilised or networked effectively. Awareness of these needs has resulted in the RPEI adopting a facilitative approach to its implementation in different national and regional contexts.

Two examples are given. Vanuatu educators expressed the need to develop basic research skills before they could be expected to do research as part of their own self-reflections and critique of their education system. The RPEI agreed and facilitated. Following the Vanuatu pilot activities in 2002, there were to be no further national activities until July 2003. However, due to the national crisis in Solomon Islands, which led to the closure of schools for long periods of time, leading Pacific educators felt that there was a need to support the educational leaders of Solomon Islands. The RPEI responded and facilitated a planning workshop as requested by Solomon Islands educators.

Another component of the approach that has been useful to ensure NZAID and its Pacific partners were responsive has been the big-picture strategising sessions among leading Pacific educators and with NZAID. Other useful outcomes, which have become integral parts of the RPEI approach, have been the strategic alliance-building, networking and capacity-building. People who were once professionally isolated have been grouped together, linked, supported and are growing in confidence together.

#### **5. Pacific peoples and processes**

Product-oriented approaches in educational aid are common in PICs. The need has been for undivided attention focused on the people who are being assisted in order to enhance their autonomy, encourage their active participation and enable their own leadership further. The RPEI approach has not neglected tangible outcomes but has instead seen them as inevitable 'bonuses'. It is argued that, when a discouraged people are motivated, they are likely to be inspired to act and, in doing so, are likely to produce the desired tangible outcomes. As has been stated, the RPEI is focused on

people—Pacific peoples—and on strengthening them as leaders of education. By design, the first five-year period of the initiative is intended to motivate Pacific peoples, to inspire them to assume a greater responsibility for the education of their communities. An exciting effect of this approach has been a number of impressive tangible outcomes, such as completed research projects, follow-up national activities and the publication and dissemination of research.

The need to take account of local understandings and interpretations has also been long felt within PICs. By engaging Pacific educators to support their colleagues across borders, the RPEI has allowed for Pacific understandings and approaches of working with people to be utilised in educational aid situations. The RPEI was also successful in undertaking a self-evaluation followed by an external assessment by a critical friend on the goals and performance of the Initiative. Again, while the two-part evaluation was financed by NZAID, the activity was commissioned and done in order to strengthen RPEI's capacity to undertake what it intends to achieve. These activities are what I call, 'brown-breaking', in the sense that they are innovations of change by Pacific Islanders (brown-skinned people). Moreover, they are ground-breaking for aid relationships in PICs.

### **Emerging positive signs**

A number of positive outcomes have emerged from the approach taken by the RPEI. First, Pacific educators have received the initiative positively. Some have agreed with its focus on people—on leader development. Some have been inspired and encouraged by it. Others have identified with the opportunities that the RPEI has created for their own involvement. Yet more have been attracted to it because of the approach used, the modeling by leading Pacific educators, and the arm's length nature of the NZAID involvement. For whatever reason, Pacific peoples have easily identified with RPEI and appear to have a convincing sense of ownership of it.

Second, the establishment of networks and strategic groupings has meant that Pacific educators working on remote islands are not as professionally isolated as they used to be. Pacific educators have been able to communicate with each other, sharing information, discussing issues and debating about



education. While the linkages are still in their infancy, the signs are promising because, for many, years of professional isolation have been demoralising.

Third, published research by Pacific educators about their own education systems is not in abundance. The RPEI has excited educators about research. It has demystified research and has encouraged teachers and curriculum officers to reflect systematically on their work and have their efforts scrutinised by their colleagues and others. The small, applied research projects being undertaken in a number of countries are the beginnings of creating relevant research and making this accessible to educators, students and policy-makers.

Fourth, research that has been done through the RPEI is being incorporated into teaching and policy-making. The book, *Tree of Opportunity: Re-thinking Pacific Education*, is being used for further debate and discussion. Having Pacific interpretations documented in books is a useful addition to the combined understandings of education.

Fifth, the approach appeared to have had success in mobilising community participation in educational planning in Vanuatu. Following the 2002 activities, Ni-Vanuatu educators moved on and took the initiative further by holding seminars, redeveloping policies and applying research findings to improve practice at the school level in their country.

### **Emerging challenges**

The following list shows some of the challenges arising from the RPEI approach, as noted by Sanga, Niroa and Teweiariki (2003).

1. The 'hands-off' support by NZAID has allowed Pacific educators to provide leadership and direction in an exploratory manner. It is, however, not a blank cheque approach but rather one of according respect to Pacific partners, developing and enhancing relationships with them. The approach has also allowed for a more organic experience of development partnerships between Pacific educators and NZAID. A key challenge of this approach has been the building and maintenance of trust between key individuals that represent the various partners.

2. When outsiders (including other Pacific educators) are working with their colleagues within national contexts, they are likely to be more successful if they go in as 'one of the nationals'. Having Melanesians supporting their colleagues in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands was new—and successful. As a strategy, it represented a 'browning of advice'. In reality, successful empathy with colleagues has less to do with skin colour or culture but more to do with a sincere attitude of identifying with and respecting the knowledge, skills and expertise of national colleagues. The onus here rests on the outsider supporters, rather than on their national colleagues. The 'browning of advice' and support across international boundaries has potential and must receive greater backing by donors and Pacific governments. A challenge of this approach has been the negotiation of tensions between 'browning of advice', which may be inexperienced, against 'expert' or consultant advice, which may be more expedient, prompt and neat; and the values put on these.

3. The Vanuatu pilot was a success story because the Re-thinking Vanuatu Education Initiative was adequately contextualised. It was explained in a manner understood by the community. The activities were consistent and supportive of each other, rather than disjointed. The initiative made strategic use of education and community stakeholders, ensuring their commitment, leadership and participation. It made key and timely linkages with politicians, other government officers, senior education officials and key national stakeholders.

4. Regular consultations among key Pacific educators and with NZAID have allowed these educators to identify potential opportunities and risks, articulate strategic happenings in education effectively, and undertake appropriate action. These consultations ensured that Pacific educators were able to be responsive to the demands of educational change regionally and, to a certain extent, within some national contexts.

5. During aid project discussions and negotiations, Pacific educators have not often stayed engaged with donors, particularly after instances where the former have been disappointed by the actions of donors. In establishing the PERF, there were serious disagreements and some tension between NZAID and Pacific educators. In spite of these, Pacific educators remained

engaged with donor representatives, rather than withdraw from them. This action led to improved understandings of the issues by both partner groups.

6. Because the RPEI is organic, focuses on 're-thinking' and is exploratory in orientation, its agenda and the issues it has raised have called for a responsiveness that NZAID structures and processes are struggling to deal with adequately. This is because, although it is a development agency, NZAID is still a government department. As such, NZAID needs to follow public sector organisational rules that do not necessarily allow for the newer challenges and demands from its Pacific partners. NZAID's ability to be responsive to newer ways of working has also been tested by specialist staff shortage and changes within the Agency.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, a context-sensitive approach to educational aid is one which is responsive to underlying educational needs. In the context of PICs, these go beyond the commonly stated needs for improved access, greater participation or better trained teachers insofar as they relate more to the need for leadership by Pacific peoples themselves, their need for active engagement with and understanding from donors.

The RPEI case study has raised a number of issues and challenges relating to aid delivery. Integral to these is the acknowledgement that working with Pacific communities towards strengthening their institutional capacities, developing their sense of autonomy and creating hope in those communities takes time. The goal in this instance is to promote the nurturing of educational leaders that are able to take charge of the educational destinies of their communities. Such an emphasis requires that donor approaches enhance the achievement of this goal, not use strategies that are counter to it or ignore this goal.

NZAID has demonstrated a preparedness to accommodate new ways of working with its Pacific partners. For RPEI and its exploratory approach to be developed further, Sanga and Nally (2002:9) suggest that a formative dialogue take place between NZAID and leading Pacific educators. The authors note that, for this process to succeed, "it will need to be underpinned by a commitment to a common purpose, development of a shared understanding of what it will take to achieve that purpose and a good degree of tolerance and support within the partnership".

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