

## PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE: THE CASE OF NAURU

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### Introduction

Nauru, the world's smallest independent republic with a land area of just 21 sq km, was named Pleasant Island by the first Europeans who went there. The phosphate deposits began to be mined early in the twentieth century by a German/British consortium. During World War 1, the island was occupied by Australian forces. It gained independence in 1968.

The population of Nauru is just over 13,287<sup>10</sup>. Nauruans are in the majority (58%), other Pacific Islanders account for 26%, Chinese 8% and Europeans 8%.

In 2003, there were 1375 primary school students attending the nine primary schools, staffed by 63 teachers. The two secondary schools catered for 645 students taught by 34 teachers.<sup>11</sup> Only the government secondary school goes up to Form 6.

The official language is Nauruan, reputedly a difficult language to learn, especially its phonology. Until now, there is no standardised version of the language, and neither is the orthography agreed on.

English is the language of instruction at all levels in the Nauruan school system and is used in all written interactions in the country. While Nauruan is the mother tongue of Nauruans and is widely spoken, few people read and write it. Reading material is limited; there is, however, a

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ne.html> the CIA World Factbook accessed July 2006.

<sup>11</sup> From <http://www.spc.int/prism/social/enrolments.html> accessed July 2006.

Nauruan Bible and hymnbook, and some people can read these, having learnt in church.

Some of the problems identified as preventing the teaching of Nauruan in schools are the lack of publications in Nauruan, not even the Nauruan dictionary that was begun in 1970; the lack of a Nauruan language programme created by language specialists; and the lack of qualified teachers of Nauruan. In sum, there is a general lack of capacity, community interest and political commitment. While some efforts have been made in the past to introduce Nauruan into the school curriculum, none has met with success.

This situation can be explained by the perception that it is not important to be literate in Nauruan; children go to school to learn English, for this is the language needed to survive.

With its small population, and at one stage relative wealth, the people were easily influenced by change and began to lose their culture and language. The language continues to be eroded and language maintenance is not considered important.

#### **Extracts from the Nauru EFA Report**

In line with community aspirations and national objectives and needs the National Education Policy was, and remains:

To provide opportunities for all Nauruans to gain knowledge and skills to contribute constructively to the community and economic development of Nauru. To contribute to the Nauruan society, identity and pride based on a foundation of obedience to God; respect for each other; loyalty to the State, its President and [traditional] leaders.

In 1994 the Department of Education, in consultation with the public and other Government departments/agencies, through a public seminar on the theme "Education for Nauru Now and Beyond 2000" set the broad direction of Nauru for the next ten years to give a quality Nauruan Education System from which all Nauruan children may:-

- gain knowledge of skills so that they may contribute productively to the community and the economic development of the country, and
- contribute to the preservation of Nauruan society, Nauruan identity and pride.

## **EFA Goals and Targets for Nauru**

1.3.4 To uphold and implement a bilingual system of education in which the Nauruan language is the National Language, though (at the same time) the English language is not to be neglected.

This goal was set to strengthen and ensure the survival of the Nauruan language and it was believed that Nauruans, being more comfortable with their own language, would understand and perform better in their studies.

1.4.2 To ensure that all students are literate in English and Nauruan.

“The general hope to have all students literate in English and Nauruan is difficult to achieve with languages. English is being taught at school while Nauruan is not formally taught at primary but spoken widely. Nauruan will take time as the work of preparing the written form of it is slow. Nauruan has two known scripts and decisions have to be made about which script is to be official and thus can be used in schools. The majority of students who pass out of school will have a reasonable level of literacy particularly in English. Although illiteracy is not a problem for Nauru it is the level of literacy that is a concern.”

### **Part III Prospects**

11 Policy Directions for the Future – Way Forward

Significant numbers of Nauruans are illiterate in English and have a poor command of Nauruan.

It was found that the education system is failing to produce Nauruans competent to deal with the future. There is a lack of continuity, relevance and culturally appropriate curriculum which all combine to contribute to academic failure, loss of identity and sense of purpose.

### **Nauruan Studies**

It is acknowledged that there is a need for the education system to contribute to the preservation of the identity of Nauruan culture by having language, culture and tradition as part of the formal school programme. The research of Nauruan culture should be initiated by the Education Department in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism so that information and icons can be collected for permanent record.

### **NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY FRAMEWORK: *JARDEN KEPHAS' PERSONAL VIEW***

Ever since formal education in Nauru began in the 1920s, English has been taught in schools. In the economic environment of the 20s, it was considered important for Nauruans to be proficient in English, and the way to achieve this was by teaching English in school. Further, since Nauruan was widely used outside the school, it was not felt necessary to teach it. Learning Nauruan in school was seen as an unnecessary hindrance, an extra burden for schoolchildren as it would add to their workload.

In 1971, two years after Nauruan independence, the Nauru Language Bureau (NLB) was established to maintain the proper use of the Nauruan language and to develop a Nauruan-English dictionary. To date, no such dictionary has been published and the language has been eroding through the dominance of English. For example, the Nauruan chants that used Nauruan words which are no longer current are lost; no recording or transcription was ever done. In 2003, The NLB was made defunct.

On the bright side, Catholic and Protestant missionaries were more proactive in promoting literacy in Nauruan, translating religious books, printing them and teaching Nauruan. The Nauruan Government played no part in this. The few people who are literate in Nauruan have their ministers to thank.

In the 1990s there was some effort to introduce the language into the early childhood programme and the primary schools. This was

unsuccessful, however, largely due to lethargy and lack of commitment by teachers and the government. Lack of consultation among stakeholders was another a contributing factor to this failure.

The mindset of the wider community and some government officials is still focused entirely on English, in the belief that, in order for the country to develop, its children must be proficient in English and the best way to do this is for the children to learn only one language, and that language must be English.

It is, however, becoming more evident from studies around the world, that the mother tongue is the best medium for teaching children. As noted in Dr 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki's paper presented to the Forum Secretariat Education Ministers meeting in 2004, "the mother tongue is confirmed as ... the best medium for teaching a child, particularly in the early years of education since it is also clear that children do not master their first language until they are at least 12 years of age and that it is critical for both cognitive development and successful second language acquisition."

Against mounting evidence both regionally and worldwide, it is now clear that Nauru has to seriously re-think its education visions. The following is a possible vision.

The introduction of Nauruan into the schools can:

- enable the students to play an active role in the development of their country,
- enhance their cognitive development,
- enable them to effectively learn and use their second language (English),
- better prepare them for global needs, and
- stop the erosion of their language.

Possible activities include:

- educating the community and government about the benefits of Nauruan language studies being introduced into the education system,
- formation of a committee of dedicated and committed people to help kick start the programme,
- recruitment of language experts to help direct the committee,
- training of teachers to be linguistically and culturally competent in their own language and culture, and
- development of resource materials.

Possible difficulties include:

- changing the mindset of the nation,
- lack of any specialist/linguist in Nauru,
- acquiring funding for training and resources, and
- a long wait before outcomes can be assessed.

### **The time factor**

The process should start as soon as possible. Policies, codification, and standardisation will be slowly brought in and strengthened. When the community and government are more comfortable with the programme, it will be time to discuss changes and developments in the programme, taking a broad, impartial view.

Throughout the process, the key word is development. There will, no doubt be teething problems, but it must be remembered that big things come from small beginnings.