

13 Multilateral Assistance to Education in the Pacific Island States

A view from Unesco/ SOPAC

The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Unesco or the Pacific States.

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Peter Higginson examines the provision of multilateral assistance to the small states of the Pacific in relation to the variables of scale, isolation and dependence. He finds that all three factors have constrained the effectiveness of educational aid. He considers the mismatch between western models of educational provision and the realities of the small island context. Certain conventions such as the counterpart and modes of costing are critically assessed. Despite the problems, Higginson concludes that there is an increasing appreciation on the part of donors of the special situations obtaining in small island states leading to the imperative of flexibility. He cites the current pre-vocational curriculum project in the South Pacific as an example of improved practice. With increased appreciation of micro-planning, the interest now developing in respect of the educational development of small island states can be directed more effectively.

Preamble

That the Commonwealth Secretariat has taken a lead in exploring the conceptual and operational significance of smallness in programming external assistance in education can only be a source of abiding satisfaction for the United Nations specialised agencies, especially Unesco. At the same time, the reasons for this lead, or more properly, the lag on the part of the multilaterals, deserve investigation because the answers shed light on why certain existing intervention strategies under-perform and how they can be improved.

Unesco's involvement with small island states is theoretically as old as the organisation. It became a reality from the time Pacific countries became Member States. Where the Pacific is concerned, however, it is really only in the past year or so that a nascent but focused search for strategies for cost effective co-operation is beginning to take place, and this is due both to the groundwork laid by the Commonwealth Secretariat, publicly acknowledged at the Fifth Regional Conference of Ministers of Education and those responsible for Economic Planning in Asia and the Pacific (Bangkok, 4-11 March, 1985 - MINEDAP 5) and to the recent presence of Unesco in the Pacific, made possible by the establishment, in September 1984, of the Unesco Office for the Pacific States (Unesco/SOPAC), in Apia, Western Samoa.

A number of difficulties have arisen during the first two years of the operation of the Unesco office in the South Pacific. They relate to a considerable extent to the three variables - scale, isolation and dependence - examined so fruitfully at the Commonwealth Secretariat's Mauritius Conference. This paper proposes to try to identify and, where possible, to explain these difficulties. It is felt that they are typical of the experience of many agencies working in the Pacific, and that they are a direct result of the poor communications between the multilaterals and the small island states of the region.

Scale

Turning first to the issue of scale, it is clear that these states are penalised because of their size, probably not maliciously, but not always inadvertently either. It has for all intents and purposes only been since MINEDAP 5 that the Pacific was heard from – or indeed heard of. The claims of small island states for due attention and a fair share of Unesco's resources are frequently lost in the better practised and more compelling rhetoric of their giant neighbours to the west and northwest.

Smallness has meant that the Pacific states, which typically have fewer people in their education ministries, frequently cannot release their staff or indeed even afford to pay for them to attend international policy making and programming conferences. If no one is present to defend their interests they get little or nothing: 'les absents ont toujours tort'. Even when a representative is sent, it is not uncommon for the participant from small Pacific states to find that the oratorical and corridor negotiating skills of large country conference-goers have been raised to the level of a performing art over the years, with the result that the interests of small countries, if not actually shut out beforehand as a result of deals already struck, are not conveyed through the polished presentation necessary to mobilise significant support from the floor for their views.

Smallness holds other disadvantages for island states. They exist both in respect to Unesco and the funding agencies. Technical staff posted at headquarters and the Bangkok Regional Office are much in demand to mount or backstop technical assistance projects in member states. Faced with the necessity of choosing between servicing a large or a small country, they tend to be compelled to opt for the former. Indeed, as New Zealanders will confirm, it is not uncommon for small countries, be they developing small island states or industrialised nations, to be gently but firmly reminded of their relative importance in the larger scheme of things.

Where UNDP is the funding source, as it is for the vast majority of multilateral projects, small island states are also disadvantaged by

the procedures by which funding decisions are made. There is a traditional design which determines the allocation of funds for supporting country programmes which is fixed for each country by UNDP. It determines the budget for a particular project and the amount of personnel to be allocated. The scaling of available resources according to size is not necessarily accompanied by the reduction of other inputs, especially personnel costs, which are available to a country. The ultimate outcome of this is that funds for a project mainly comprise personnel costs. An example of this was the case of Vanatu where one project consisting of only one international input - a resident expert - was going to use up over 30 per cent of the country's allocation of aid from its Indicative Planning Figure (IPF) which represents its total budget support under its country programme.

To counter this tendency, UNDP is increasingly favouring, albeit reluctantly, government execution of projects so that agency overheads are not charged to the IPFs. In theory, this means that the governments are responsible for everything from recruitment to backstopping and project management. In practice, because small island administrative structures are already overtaxed, the UNDP representatives have to take on these functions themselves, something they are not set up to handle. Many IPF funded projects are therefore carried out 'in consultation' with Unesco. This euphemism for free service is bearable for the time being because the volume of work is still small but it is clear that if it increased dramatically, Unesco could not long survive on such an arrangement without a major restructuring of its staff and methods of work.

While UNDP seeks to leave the IPF funded projects to the countries concerned, it is turning to other ways of stretching the dollar and making use of agency expertise. One such is to make use of Intercountry Programme (ICP) funds when it sees an affordable and necessary role for the agencies. The relative growth of ICP projects in the Pacific is telling. Fully 50 per cent of the total number of projects handled by Unesco/SOPAC, and well over that in their dollar value, are regional. ICP projects in the Pacific sub-region are

in fact UNDP's largest sub-regional programme and ICP funds are greater than all Country Programmes combined. Another strategy is to make use of sub-contracts to regional research institutions (e.g. University of the South Pacific, South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment) and to 'jobbing' - i.e. using fee contracts as a means of getting around the obstacle of standard costs. Unesco is currently executing two large projects in this manner and others are expected to follow.

Two problems are attendant on these two strategies. The first is that individual small island states tend to resist regional solutions to national education problems, in part because of traditional rivalries between island nations, and in part because national educational reform in such states, as elsewhere, is an intensely local enterprise, invested as it is with the soul and identity of the people it is to serve. Tonga, for example, does not want the solutions of Samoa or the Solomons thrust at it.

The second problem is the general dearth of acceptable regional research institutions. Either they lack the depth of technical and administrative expertise to execute technical assistance projects at a significantly reduced cost, or for one reason or another, they are not politically acceptable. Moreover, there is the feeling - justified or not - that if 'one gets what one pays for', cheaper manpower may go hand in glove with lower quality.

Isolation

The isolation of the small island states in the region plays a negative role on the multilateral agency side as well. Being situated further from the Pacific region than from any other, Unesco and its sister agencies are more cut off from the very problems they seek to alleviate. Less is known outside the region about small island states and their problems than about the countries of Asia and Africa. They are visited far less frequently by staff specialists not only from Headquarters but even from the Regional Office in Bangkok which nominally covers Asia and the Pacific. Even regional projects managed

from Bangkok which are intended to serve both sub-regions frequently have very little interaction with the other small islands of the Pacific.

A glance at the activities planned for the UNDP/Unesco network known as the Asia-Pacific Programme of Educational Innovation for Development, APEID for short, is sufficient to see that a tiny fraction of the project's annual budget is spent on the small states (Papua New Guinea, an exception, has a population of 3.5 million and hence does not count as a small island state). APEID puts out a great many publications which ostensibly cover Asia and the Pacific but it is rare to find one that concerns the smaller islands of the sub-region.

The major causes cited include the undeniable difficulty in obtaining case study material and answers to requests for information, as well as the time and money for first hand investigations. Indeed, leaving aside slow answers, correspondence time is a significant problem in its own right. It takes nearly one month for a letter posted from Unesco to reach Apia. If one adds to that the delays caused by the need for prior consultations, visas and the like, before a letter can be despatched, the temptation is understandably strong to pass over the Pacific if one wants to issue a publication without unreasonable delay. But why not publish more within the Pacific? A question of scale again: print runs are too small for economical publishing.

Dependence

A third major characteristic of small nation states is that of dependence. The level of bilateral assistance, particularly from Australia and New Zealand, to educational reform projects in the small island states of the Pacific is often so great that it is often very difficult for other agencies, particularly multilaterals, to obtain a useful and uncontested entry point in the field of education in these states. One reason for this is that those agencies already operating there often defend the precedence of their prior claims over late arrivals with what is tantamount to zealous protectiveness.

A dog-in-the-manger attitude also tends to occur. In 1981, for example, Unesco commenced operations on a ten-country regional vocational curriculum project. The initial plan was to cover four subject areas, one of which was agricultural education. This elective was, however, dropped because a bilateral agency had stated a prior claim to it. Today, five years later, nothing has been done in this field and Unesco has once again been approached to pick up this activity.

One of the penalties of a high degree of dependence on external assistance is that individual countries know that dependence is a two-way street. True, a country like Tonga or Western Samoa receives over 30 per cent of its income in the form of overseas aid and to this extent, because they could not exist without it, their degree of dependence is high. But the agencies, both multilateral and bilateral, exist to provide assistance. Aid, so to speak, is their stock in trade and a high market demand for their services is seen as evidence of both their skills and, more especially, their *raison d'être*. Indeed one might well wonder what would happen were the small Pacific state really to threaten aid agencies with self-reliance, a goal widely espoused. In the existing situation, competition among agencies runs high. Because individual countries know this very well, many of them succumb to the temptation to encourage and hold out for the highest bidder. The stakes can be high in terms of opportunity costs and sometimes everyone comes out a loser.

One common occurrence is the difficulty of finding funding for some of the smaller projects not covered by the bilateral agencies which fund the lion's share of educational reform projects. What appear to be loose ends are in fact occasionally of vital importance to the impact of a bilaterally-funded initiative. An example might be the publication of instructional materials developed but not printed under bilateral aid. UNDP would be reluctant to pick up these crumbs from the table of the bilateral agencies especially if not initially involved in the development of the materials in the first instance.

Mismatched solutions

International missions, whether they come to the developing countries to conduct sectoral studies of the type often carried out by the

World Bank, or are attempting to identify and prepare externally-funded projects, tend to fall prey to using the yardstick of the intellectual baggage they brought with them to assess the needs of small island states. This baggage is shaped by two factors: their own large, home-country socio-economic backgrounds; and the classic development characteristics of the main recipients of technical assistance provided by the UN, from projects where these experts have gained their past professional experience. The conclusions they reach and the recommendations they make tend to be derived from typically western, large-country models, and these paradigms they attempt to overlay on small island states.

Many planners and educators from small Pacific islands go along with these proposals more or less unquestioningly. Sometimes, of course, they lack the technical background to probe some of the planning assumptions. But many have done their postgraduate studies in developed countries and feel relatively comfortable with the strategies proposed and even the methods of work.

Two typically mismatched solutions to educational problems in small island nations are the setting up of the classic planning unit and the establishment, or expansion, of technical institutes. The former is predicated on the assumption that enough is or can be known about the future of these small island economies and their human resource requirements to extrapolate reliable educational targets from them. Most of their exports are limited to a very small number of primary sector commodities – copra, sugar and the like – and apart from being in direct competition with dozens of other countries all trying to sell the same thing, they are subject to wild market fluctuations over which they have no control. In addition there are land tenure problems, unskilled, labour intensive economies and the like, and the task of the planner becomes increasingly an exercise in tea-leaf reading.

As for the technical education institutions in small states one need go no further than recall Phillip Foster's compelling criticism of unacceptably high per capita fixed and recurrent costs, inappropriate curricula, and the tendency for these institutions to want to graduate to the status of a polytechnic, and a steely resistance to change. But

where the Pacific states are concerned, the negative aspects accumulate. Not only are they not articulated to real manpower requirements for the reasons described above; once set in motion, these 'machines infernales' seem to be unstoppable and crank out technicians with exaggeratedly high notions of their own worth, for an insufficient number of jobs, with skills learned on machinery that seems to exist only at the technical college in question, little if any ability to be retrained, and a perverse disinclination to work anywhere but in the major urban centres.

If these familiar examples of criticism can be justifiably laid at the feet of the advisers which, say, Unesco hires, a corresponding one exists on the funding agency side. UNDP has a classification of technical assistance projects to which all are assigned at the preparation state. Among the most common where education - and therefore Unesco - is concerned is what is known as institutional capacity building. The expression implies the desirability not to say need for a certain critical mass and along with it a level of specialisation. Hence, the intention is clear: institutions should be built willy nilly, regardless of whether they are appropriate to the situation.

It is conceded that something resembling an institution is probably appropriate to take on the task of planning and managing occupational skills development. But is it scarcely likely that a ministry composed of twelve professionals, eight of whom are inspectors, will be able to undertake the planning activity, and develop the appropriate stages for achieving the underlying goal, as usually expected of UNDP. Those at the top of the ministry are, and must remain, polyvalent and essentially reactive. Conversely they cannot afford the luxury of locking themselves away, totally absorbed in a single project. The result of this situation is that UNDP has been reluctant in the past to move away from long standing views on acceptable input levels for programming purposes and from its principles in respect of resource management.

Planning and management of the ambiguous

A high tolerance for ambiguity is an unwritten requirement that figures in the job description of anyone working in development

assistance. Where small Pacific islands are concerned, few would contest that it reaches new unsuspected heights. Powerful intervening variables exist but cannot be adequately controlled for predictive purposes. A few examples include geopolitics (e.g. the recent flurry of USA activity following the Kiribati signing of the fishing rights treaty with the Soviet Union), shifting immigration policies which govern the number of Pacific Islanders who can work in the USA, New Zealand and Australia; shifting power blocks within the Pacific; and an uncertain world economy to which single or double crop economies are highly vulnerable.

Bilateral assistance seems to be less troubled by this ambiguity than multilateral technical assistance perhaps because it is traditionally accepted as an arm of foreign policy which makes assumptions or has goals directly related to these intervening variables. Neither, however, is completely spared the frequent uncertainty about precisely what governments would like to maximise. The absence of any kind of plan, even in someone's mind, is not uncommon. In any case, since small Pacific states lack planners, they usually hire them. Each one has an axe to grind and each claims to marry unassailable logic with cost-effectiveness. In one Pacific small island state no less than six assessment surveys were made, at government request, in respect to future planning for a national training institution. Most were carefully done, contained points for reflection, and suggested lines of action. In the event, not one was acted upon.

The result is that agencies, both multilateral and bilateral, career about, sometimes overlapping, occasionally re-doing work that has been done, with a result that may be more costly than it should have been and may be even worse than no action at all. Many doctors may be called in on the case but how many can materially gather about the patient and still work effectively? Overstepping the limit at the least delays, the operation may even kill the patient. To be fair, there is a general understanding of this dilemma and efforts, be they fumbling, are currently being made to overcome it. That they have not been crowned with more success may be more than a matter of competing political or institutional goals.

Sometimes there would appear to be a deliberate policy of divide and rule. In any event, it is not at all uncommon for two, or even more, agencies to be requested to do the same job at the same time. Analogous to airlines overbooking to ensure the plane is full? No: both agencies frequently are asked and agree to provide the services. Is one called off? Not necessarily. A recent embarrassing example known to the author was one where two consultants were provided by Unesco and ILO to do the same job at the same time (needs assessment of a technical institute). Each arrived, unbeknown to the other, at the same time. Fortunately, it was agreed to do the job jointly, but embarrassment and a sense of frustration were experienced on all sides, beyond the confines of the particular project.

Counterpart contributions, recurrent costs and other myths

Technical assistance, as the old saying goes, is the process by which an internationally recruited specialist is supposed to transfer his/her skills and knowledge to a national within a recognised period of time, thereby rendering continued in-country presence redundant. In addition, technical assistance is supposed to respond to a national request which reflects a national need and focuses on national priorities. Nationals, though they go by the unflattering term of counterparts, are thus the theoretical hub of the whole operation. But what happens when there simply are not enough, as is often the case in small states? For the truth is that the demand for counterparts by aid agencies has far exceeded the supply-side capacity to deliver. The small Pacific Island states cannot keep up with the orders.

In one such state some years ago, an analysis of the dilemma of providing counterparts for all externally-funded education projects was carried out by the Central Planning Office. It was found that some 65 per cent of the upper third of the entire civil service - not just in the education sector - would have had to down tools and be reassigned to aid projects to meet the collective requirements of the education sector alone.

In those rare cases when one is actually identified and assigned to a given project, he/she will probably have many other simultaneous responsibilities – official, traditional, and personal – and hence not be able to absorb all the so-called wisdom being offered by the visiting specialist. This notwithstanding, the majority of the aid agencies continue to subscribe to the traditional technical assistance philosophy and accordingly register surprise when counterparts are not forthcoming. More unfortunately, projects continue to be designed along the lines of the traditional technical assistance model. It is proving difficult to respond to the call for new strategies – strategies that make it possible for the multilaterals to work more with NGOs and voluntary organisations where counterparts often exist in fair supply.

The counterpart myth does not stand alone. Most technical assistance involves human resource development which entails increased expenditure by government. Someone with upgraded skills almost always sees him/herself as being a more valuable resource to the education system and having probably been underpaid before anyway, feels more than justified in laying claim to a new or better position. Higher mathematics is scarcely necessary to see at a glance that if the government is already having trouble with the existing education budget, then it is unlikely it will regard proposals for increasing the expenditure with equanimity: or will it? In fact such proposals are forthcoming, and place increasing pressure on recurrent costs. The bilaterals have long accepted this situation, but multilaterals usually balk at requests from small island states for capacity-building projects. In practice, however, requests are very rarely rejected, by either UNDP or Unesco on the grounds that the recipient country cannot furnish incontrovertible evidence of its capacity to pay recurrent costs. Questions are asked; answers are given; and the matter is usually investigated no further. Bank-funded projects are a different matter but they are something less than popular in Pacific small island states.

A third myth is that projects really can be conceived of as building blocks to development provided they are constructed in

such a way as to have clear entry and exit points. Highly prized therefore, are operationally formulated objectives based on a liberal use of performance measures, the theory of accountability, and the necessity of hard-nosed, objective (i.e. external) project evaluation. UNDP, to lend weight to this belief, has recently instituted something known as the checklist matrix by which one verifies the validity of one's assumptions made in respect to the project's goals and strategy for achieving them. The intention is that project designers are supposed to subject all the major planning assumptions to a merciless scrutiny to ensure they satisfy certain means-ends criteria.

Given the aforementioned planning ambiguity surrounding small island states, the theoretically well-designed project intended to articulate efficiently with a larger strategy appears increasingly as an exercise which has little or nothing to do with realistic development objectives. Rather, its overriding purpose seems to aim at satisfying the controller's requirements to release the funds. Accountability, it must be recognised, is an important and necessary issue and expecting that technical assistance be provided by multilateral agencies without it would be naive. At the same time its rationale should in no way become synonymous with that of technical assistance for development: two very different sets of purposes are being served.

Projects then do not lend themselves to being building blocks for development, because the outputs of one rarely if ever serve as the inputs for the next. But they seem to accomplish something else, something equally valuable, something which is ultimately serendipitous: they create and, with each succeeding project, reinforce the national capacity to exercise enlightened criticism of what is good and bad for the welfare of a country. Because Pacific projects are, on the whole, small, their lives tend to be brief. Opportunities to re-examine planning assumptions are more frequent than those in larger countries, and it is these that constitute the stone against which the Pacific States are honing their critical faculties.

Promise for the future

The combination of the above factors, unalleviated, would leave an impression that the multilaterals can accomplish nothing for the small

island states of the Pacific. On the contrary, there is hope. It lies in the direction of a less wooden, more understanding approach to co-operation on the part of the donors and an increased appreciation on the part of the recipient that scarce resources wasted are scarce resources deprived from the needy, if not in the Pacific, then elsewhere. Two projects which depart radically from the traditional multilateral way of doing things are considered briefly to illustrate this. It is hoped that they will convey an image of opportunity. While one concerns pre-vocational curriculum development and the other planning, in fact they could have focused on any sub-sector issue. Both are nominally regional; each is essentially national.

To gain access to UNDP-ICP funds and satisfy individual small Pacific states that their national requirements were being met, a regional pre-vocational curriculum project was set up using an unconventional model. Sub-contracted to USP in an effort to reduce costs (it is not bound by UN standard cost procedures) and to reinforce regional research institutions, the project has one full-time staff member, the Project Co-ordinator. His task is to oversee the setting up of a group of national curriculum development units established for the purposes of the project. These units, while operating within the overall framework of the project, are staffed solely by nationals. At regular periods, they are assisted by the services of consultants who are staff members of USP's Institute of Education.

The project determines the levels (Forms I to V) and subject areas for which it was designed to provide assistance. Individual governments, however, are left to decide for which classes each wishes to develop curriculum and in which fields. The project is thus a regional framework for a network of nevertheless essentially national activities. Freed from the bonds of externally imposed conformity, individual curriculum development units are not only gratifyingly enthusiastic about achieving their self-appointed goals but showing an unexpected willingness to seek regional ties on their own.

It is this latter tendency that has prompted the Co-ordinator to hold periodic regional meetings of staff from the various curriculum

units involved to allow them to compare notes, exchange ideas and even elect to share certain materials. The Co-ordinator, for his part, continues to treat each unit's problems separately and tries to respond with answers appropriate to the special national characteristics of each situation. The project is, in the foregoing respects, a radical departure from the previous Unesco curriculum project which, though considerably more ambitious, was more conservative in its approach to developing national competencies.

The second project, not yet operational, concerns the provision of training in planning and management to inspectors, headteachers and school principals in the Pacific islands. It is similar to the preceding project in that it too seeks to provide for national needs within a regional framework and accordingly will be keeping a very low profile. However, in addition, this one also seeks to lessen the effects of three other problems as well, namely: administrative delays in fielding requested inputs; insisting on a certain critical mass (of interest, national staff, money) as a precondition to mounting a project; and providing all instructions on a standardised basis, i.e. in English and following a norm-referenced syllabus.

The project employs a strategy which takes account of two factors widely encountered in the Pacific islands. One is the mercurial nature of the staffing and programming situation. If the project is to be of any real service, a strategy of rapid intervention must be built into it. This approach is, among other things, intended to minimise in-country expatriate presence which is sometimes unproductive and can be oppressive, even in its most innocent manifestations. Such an approach also downplays capacity building in favour of polyvalence.

The second strategy is that the level of English of the target groups, that is to say, inspectors and headteachers - is on the whole too low to benefit from regional training. For the project to be effective therefore, the Co-ordinator will identify bilingual nationals - those versed in the vernacular language as well as English. Thus two categories of personnel will receive their training in English in essentially regional settings. They in turn will then be hired as national consultants by the project to mount national/vernacular

language workshops, using the international staff to backstop them as and where may be necessary and appropriate.

A parting thought

The experience of Unesco/SOPAC is only two years old so a conclusion would be both premature and misleading. As more people become interested in the problem of micro-planning and more especially of the reform of education in the small island states of the Pacific, the timid and tentative steps taken today will be transformed to the purposeful stride of people who know what they want and how they propose to obtain it. The Commonwealth Secretariat and its worldwide network of specialists piloted the test vehicle; let us hope that those of us who joined their efforts later can bring something to the business of fine-tuning it.